塵骸魔京
CHAOS GATE
~Riders of Darkness~
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~ Riders of Darkness ~

Volume 2

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Synopsis

Enhanced Experimental Subject No. 9—Fantastica. This is the name forced upon the girl known as Makimoto Misae. Despite longing for an ordinary life more than anyone else, she has fallen in love with a boy who is unshakably calm and seemingly devoid of emotion—the "heartless" Kumon Katsuki.

However, their fleeting peace is abruptly torn away. The anti-nonhuman organization Strass, the enigmatic huntress Ignis, the fanged dwellers of the night, and the mysterious Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono from the distant wilds—one after another, they appear, tearing away the brief peace the two had shared.

As they resolve to face the oncoming storm, fate ruthlessly drags the pair toward a cruel and inevitable conclusion…

The final volume of the novel adaptation of Nitroplus's acclaimed game arrives at last!

CHAOS GATE
-Riders of Darkness-

Koudaka Shirou
Hanawa Momiji
Ugaya
Human Flare
Makimoto Fuyuko
Mineyuki Ryou
Ignis
Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono
Kumon Katsuki
Makimoto Misae
Tanaka Yoshiharu
Father Mercuriali
Kumon Megumi
Kanata Saemonnojou Yukinori

We cross the river of blood with our tears

We race the wasteland of death with our dreams

——"For Whose Sake", Shoutarou Ishinomori

Chapter One

- 1 -

Makimoto Misae still remembered clearly everything that happened on the day they first moved to Saimatsu City.

The long row of bright, spotless new streets and houses before her held her gaze. "We're going to start a new life here," her older sister had told her.

At that time, Saimatsu City was in the middle of a major urban development boom, and because Strass Pharmaceuticals had established its headquarters there, the growing city was full of energy everywhere.

They stood before one of the doors in a neatly arranged row of apartments. The nameplate showed only the number "909"; their names had not yet been added. Her sister used a silver key to unlock the door.

Seeing the pristine, spotless, almost too-beautiful white walls inside made Misae feel a little intimidated.

Her sister gave her a slight push from behind.

"Excuse us."

Misae said it softly, only for her sister to burst into laughter.

Her sister strode into the room and shouted loudly enough for the neighbors to hear:

"I'm home!"

She shouted it again.

The cheerful cry was infectious, and Misae found herself smiling as well.

"I'm home!"

Her voice wasn't as loud as her sister's, but she still tried her best.

Not long after her sister opened the luggage, the once spotless room instantly became a chaotic mess.

First, tea was knocked over, soaking the carpet; then, while moving furniture, they accidentally scratched the wall. They even knocked over a cardboard box, causing a whole case of manga to scatter across the floor—since the bookshelf hadn't been assembled yet, there was no place to put the books.

Watching her carefree sister clean up the mess, the tension in Misae's heart gradually faded.

...She slowly got used to it.

Both to the apartment, and to the person living in it with her.

Makimoto Fuyuko set up their mother's memorial tablet, lit incense, and then turned on the TV.

After finishing all that, she lay comfortably on the sofa like a cat.

"Fuyu-nee, you haven't finished unpacking yet."

"It can't be helped. It's our own fault for not having a video recorder."

Meaning she didn't want to miss her favorite show.

Misae sighed helplessly and obediently sat down to watch TV with her sister.

As part of its charity program, Strass Pharmaceuticals rented apartments to families with no support at very low prices, and also offered well-paid clinical drug trial work and scholarships.

This was the main reason Makimoto Fuyuko decided to move to Saimatsu City. She wanted her smarter little sister to at least make it through high school.

When Misae later learned this, she asked her sister:

"Are drug trials safe?"

"Relax. They even give me health checkups at the same time. It's a pretty good deal."

Fuyuko replied with a carefree smile.

Everything that happened afterward was inevitable.

"Suitability A+. Capture her."

With that single sentence, Ugaya erased Makimoto Fuyuko's existence. They spent months constructing a cover story so that everything appeared to be a simple traffic accident.

The funeral was almost entirely arranged by Strass. Misae attended in a daze, and the one who approached her to offer condolences was none other than Ugaya herself.

"Though it is somewhat difficult to say... to be honest, we can't claim the accident was entirely unrelated to our company's drug trials..."

Ugaya confessed to Misae during the funeral.

"Eh?"

"The drug affects the mind... after administration, it can cause a dazed, intoxicated feeling. Of course, we confirmed the effects had worn off and reminded her to be careful on the way home... but she couldn't avoid the oncoming car. I think the drug may have played some part."

At that age, Misae already had a basic understanding of society, so she couldn't help doubting whether a pharmaceutical company would really admit fault so honestly, even if it were true.

"Honestly, I know it's not appropriate for me to say this... but we really liked Fuyuko-san."

Hearing her gentle words, Misae nodded. Her sister truly had been loved by everyone, no matter where she went.

"From the company's standpoint, of course we want to avoid legal disputes. After negotiating with upper management, we managed to

secure this compensation for you. I know money can't bring your sister back..."

"B-but..."

Looking at the documents, Misae didn't know what to say. Ugaya took her hand and said:

"You don't need to decide right away. Let a lawyer look at it first."

Seeing Ugaya's serious expression, Misae could only nod.

"If there's anything else I can help with, please contact me anytime."

She handed her a business card.

And that became the turning point that decided Makimoto Misae's fate.

Ugaya was not a sadist. Although she was strict with incompetent subordinates, she was normally very gentle, and even kept a large cat at home.

She was an egalitarian—whether her test subjects were mice or humans, she treated them the same.

Monitoring their health, caring for them emotionally, objectively conducting experiments, and finally disposing of them. This entire process caused her no internal conflict.

Over the next several months, she continued meeting with Makimoto Misae in a personal capacity. Ugaya had genuinely liked Makimoto Fuyuko as a human being, and she liked Misae as well.

When a person is emotionally vulnerable, they have no resistance to kindness. It was inevitable that Misae would come to trust Ugaya and Strass Pharmaceuticals. Eventually, she accepted Ugaya's invitation for a "health checkup."

At that time, Makimoto Fuyuko was still alive as a human. A+ suitability individuals were rare, so even though she was confined and brainwashed, the experiments were conducted with extreme care, as if handling a precious object.

The results of Misae's examination made Ugaya jump for joy. Just as she had suspected from their blood relation, Misae was also an A+ suitability individual, sharing many traits with her sister.

The operation to capture Makimoto Misae had long been prepared, so it proceeded swiftly.

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A notice was posted for all residents of the apartment building.

"Apartment cleaning notice. The hallways will be temporarily closed for floor waxing. The schedule for each floor is as follows..."

The actual events in the building that day were as follows:

19:32. Confirmed the resident of room 909 (hereafter referred to as the Subject) returned home via surveillance cameras.

23:00. Subject confirmed asleep. Ninth floor sealed off under the pretext of "cleaning."

23:10. Successfully sealed off Room 909. Sedative gas introduced through the ventilation system.

24:00. Began ventilation.

24:10. Cleaning personnel load the Subject into a container for transport.

24:45. Subject delivered to the laboratory. Operation complete.

- 3 -

Makimoto had a dream. Her sister and mother were there, and they were all eating lunch together in an open field under a blue sky—something that could never happen in reality.

Even after she woke up, a warm feeling still lingered in her chest.

"You're awake?"

Ugaya's voice came from above. Misae opened her eyes and saw Ugaya looking down at her with the same gentle expression as always.

"Yes."

She wanted to speak, but no sound came from her throat.

Misae gradually realized where she was.

Everything but her head was covered by a blanket, and the blanket was tied down with black leather straps. A stretcher? No, this was an operating table, and she was naked under the blanket.

She tried to move her body, but she couldn't budge. Her limbs under the blanket were also firmly fixed by black leather straps.

"Um... I..."

A hospital...? Am I... was there an accident? Did an ambulance bring me here after I lost consciousness? That was the only explanation she could think of.

"Misae, don't be so nervous. Relax."

The gentle voice seeped through her entire body.

"Excuse me... what... what happened to me?"

"Don't worry. You're fine. There's nothing wrong with you at all."

The contradiction between the words and her immobility finally made Misae realize something was wrong.

"Misae, darling, would you like to see your sister?"

"What... are you talking about...?"

Ugaya's smile twisted strangely. When she stepped aside, Misae saw a large tank behind her—big enough for a person to swim in. Something was moving inside. A jellyfish? A plastic bag? In any case, it was something transparent.

"Turn on the UV lights."

Ugaya coldly gave the order.

The sudden brightness made Misae squint.

Under the fluorescent glow, something began to take shape inside the tank—a drifting green haze slowly forming an outline... a human shape?

The moment she realized the object inside was a person, she finally saw clearly.

It was a naked woman with long hair. She was desperately pounding on the wall of the water tank. Seeing that green face and expression, Makimoto barely recognized who she was.

...Fuyu-nee?

"I'm so sorry for keeping this little secret from you all this time."

Misae's mind raced, desperately trying to explain the impossible sight. Fuyu-nee was alive—not killed in the accident. She must have been badly injured and placed in this tank. It had to be some kind of special medical device. Because the procedure was illegal, they had kept it secret.

But why did Fuyu-nee look so terrified and heartbroken? Why? Why? Why?

"I'm so glad you too can meet again."

Ugaya's voice remained soft and gentle. She approached the tank, reaching her hand inside with a sudden, rough motion.

Then, with that same hand, she touched the green-tinted... Fuyu-nee.

She ran her fingers lightly from Fuyu-nee's hair to her cheek. Fuyu-nee thrashed in anger, twisting her neck in a desperate attempt to sink her teeth into Ugaya's finger.

Ugaya teased her like she was playing with a pet, dancing her fingers just out of reach, only withdrawing her hand at the very last second before those teeth could snap shut.

"It's truly amazing. Both sisters possess A+ suitability."

Fuyu-nee's expression was filled with despair, and a sense of dread slowly consumed Misae.

"Starting today, we can conduct so many more experiments. After all, I have a precious little spare now, don't I?"

Ugaya smiled with childlike innocence.

Why didn't I notice...?

That smile was like a one-way street—one that did not see people as people. It was a smile born purely from delight, nothing more. A smile that could never connect with anyone else.

Misae's chest tightened. Her whole body trembled.

The scream she finally managed to let out was so faint that even she herself couldn't hear it.

"Don't worry, Misae. I'll make you so much stronger."

Ugaya's wet hand brushed against Misae's cheek, and the girl couldn't stop herself from screaming.

"There, there... open your mouth."

With a move she'd clearly done a thousand times, Ugaya stuffed a gag into Misae's mouth, swallowing the desperate cry.

Ugaya undid the buckles and whipped away the blanket covering Misae. Exposed and naked under the harsh lights, Misae's skin broke out in a cold shiver of goosebumps.

Ugaya took out a permanent marker and pulled off the cap.

Then she began to write on Makimoto's abdomen.

"Mi-sa-e. Subject Nine."

Ugaya looked down with satisfaction.

Then her expression shifted suddenly into that of a scientist.

"Begin the initial trial. Start recording."

Countless flashes lit up around her. With her eyes shut, Misae didn't see...

...She didn't see that Ugaya was holding a syringe in her right hand, filled with a green liquid...

- 4 -

The following several years could be described as the zenith of Ugaya's career.

Because she had Misae as a spare, she was free to conduct exhaustive experiments on Makimoto Fuyuko, implanting the cultivated non-human cells into her body and mixing countless abilities into her.

Misae watched as Fuyuko lost the shape of a human, her self-awareness dissolving day by day...

Makimoto Misae's heart overflowed with happiness, though it was nothing more than a chemical illusion dancing through her veins. Amidst the pounding rhythm of severe headaches, Misae realized she had lost the capacity to hate.

Yet, she also learned that bliss and agony could occupy the same space. Witnessing her sister's state, a heart-wrenching sorrow and a drug-induced euphoria surged through Misae's body in tandem.

In the end, Makimoto Fuyuko was ravaged until nothing remained but a few masses of transparent slime.

The data harvested from those tests was immediately applied to several other experimental subjects.

The abilities derived from Fuyuko's genetic factors proved highly compatible with Misae. They granted her a body capable of extreme liquefaction, along with the specialized power to maintain a human form even in such a state.

Every day, pieces of unknown, filthy biological matter were harvested and grafted onto her. The presence of foreign objects inside her body filled her with disgust, but Misae also understood that her situation was far more fortunate than that of the nameless things being cut apart.

Among all the "Numbers", she was the only one permitted to lead a "daily life". She was to infiltrate and disperse into normal society for years, even decades, carrying out assassinations and espionage. The moment she received an order, she had to instantly transform into a weapon capable of rivaling an entire army division; that was what the higher-ups demanded of her.

N9 Fantastica could not yet be called perfect. To keep her stable required considerable additional effort, so Strass performed "adjustments" on her every night.

Even if she could only inhabit the daylight for a short time, she still felt grateful to be a part of the ordinary world. For the sake of the other "Numbers" who could not take even a single step outside the research facility, she believed with absolute conviction that she had to live even more happily.

Eventually, the non-human cells inside Misae's body came into contact with Katsuki's bodily fluids and began to react, allowing her to push her newly awakened sliver of self-awareness to its absolute limit.

She escaped from Strass, gravely wounded, crawling into the sewers. She listened carefully to the faint voice echoing inside her heart. With every step forward, blood poured out of her body, her temperature dropping along with it. At last, she reached the surface, where a single ray of light shone.

There, Misae witnessed a miracle. She threw herself toward it with all her remaining strength. Her body finally felt the faintest trace of warmth... only to be immediately flung aside.

The flame of her life was about to go out. Even so, Makimoto Misae refused to abandon hope.

It wasn't over yet. She couldn't allow herself to fall here.

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Just as Kumon Katsuki shook off the entrails clinging to him, intent on making his escape...

A faint sound suddenly reached him—a voice so fragile, it sounded like a dying little bird crying for help.

—This is a trap.

His instincts told him so. He told himself he must not look back; he had to run. Getting involved with such things never led to a favorable outcome.

—Ignore it.

His logic told him so. The data available was insufficient to

calculate the risk of engagement; therefore, the "object" potentially possessed an extremely high level of danger. If that were the case, feigning ignorance was the optimal strategy.

In the end, he chose neither instinct nor logic. Perhaps this was one of the proofs that Kumon was, indeed, human.

He was moved by the impulse that drives human evolution, the emotion capable of surpassing terror and revulsion—"curiosity".

Kumon suppressed the urge to vomit and turned his head.

On the ground writhed a mass of entrails, a lump of gray brain matter, and atop it a pair of jewel-like eyeballs that swayed atop the mess.

Kumon thought to himself...

Humans are creatures prone to empathy.

Even a mere drawing can evoke a surge of emotion, though it is nothing but an illusion. Kumon had no way of knowing what the creature before him was truly thinking; even if he sensed something, it was likely just a trick of his own perception.

But at this moment, Kumon chose to trust, even if his actions were illogical and irrational.

He chose to trust those eyes.

He chose to trust that cry for help.

...Kumon... kun...

Driven by an inexplicable flash of inspiration, the words escaped Kumon's lips:

"Makimoto-san, is that you?"

For a moment, those eyes looked as if they were nodding.

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Kumon Katsuki ran without looking back, cradling the mass of organs in his arms.

By now, he had grown largely indifferent to the scent of the viscera. He had also come to realize that a person's internal organs were surprisingly heavy. He felt a slight pang of concern as he adjusted his posture to compensate for the weight, as his mental database contained no entry for the correct way to hold a pile of organs.

What should he do once he returned home?

Megumi would certainly get mad. And how was he supposed to explain this to Manager-san?

He was practically in a daze now, his legs acting on their own.

"Stop."

The cold, sharp voice cut through the thoughts looping in Kumon's mind.

The black suit that bled into the midnight made her fiery crimson hair stand out even more.

She wasn't wearing her coat tonight.

"Ignis."

"In the flesh."

Kumon Katsuki adjusted his focus, slowly grasping the situation.

"I suggest you drop that thing. Right now."

"And your reason?"

"Because I'm going to kill it."

The "thing" in Kumon's arms suddenly curled up, writhing like a cat seeking warmth.

"Hearing that only makes me more certain that I cannot leave it here."

"Do you even understand what it is you're holding?"

"I do not."

Kumon Katsuki answered with total honesty.

"It's a type of non-human. It has taken many lives, and killing it is my job."

Ignis drew the blade hidden behind her. The jet-black steel reflected a faint gleam. The killing intent radiating from her made Katsuki's mind snap into full alertness.

"What do you mean by a ‘type’? And what were the ‘many lives’ it killed? Ignis, your statements contain too many ambiguities."

"Shut your mouth, Katsuki."

As she lowered her voice, Ignis's silhouette blurred.

Before Kumon could even register any movement, the tip of her blade was already firmly pressed against his throat.

Kumon Katsuki remained silent. He shook his head and held the entrails in his arms even tighter.

The scene fell into a heavy silence. Kumon clearly felt the bead of sweat on his cheek grow heavier until it finally traced a path downward. When the droplet hit the pavement...

"And here I thought you were the rational type."

Ignis lowered the blade from his throat.

"Logic and ethics are not synonymous. Logic possessed its own inherent correctness; one could use logical deduction to predict an outcome. However, the decision of which path to take ultimately rested with the individual."

"Listen to you, acting like such a scholar. I bet you heard that somewhere else, didn't you?"

Wearing a faint smile, Ignis turned away.

"Certain words retain their value regardless of who uttered them first."

"So, am I to understand you have no intention of handing it over?"

Kumon nodded.

The next instant, a flash of cold light crossed his vision.

For an instant it resembled an iaigiri—no, merely an orthodox battoujutsu. Ignis spun back and delivered a strike, shaving a small piece of skin from Kumon's chin.

"Is this a threat?"

Ignis simply shrugged.

"This was your choice. I have no objections, just be ready to deal with the consequences."

"Wait, Ignis. What else do you know?"

By the time Kumon asked, Ignis's figure had already vanished, silently dissolving into the darkness.

—Seriously, what is that woman after?

The wound on his chin was still bleeding, but it wasn't a significant injury, so Katsuki had no intention of freeing his hands to stop the bleeding.

The blood occasionally dripped onto the surface of the organs. Every time the viscera came into contact with Katsuki's blood, they gave a reflexive, subtle shudder.

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The bone-chilling wind.

Feeling the sting of the cold, Makimoto Misae slowly drifted back to consciousness.

Her skin, her body—every part of her was being assaulted by the freezing wind.

Could it be...

...Oh no, I'm... I'm not wearing any clothes.

She tried to move, but her body refused to obey. Her limbs remained curled in a tight, shivering ball.

Her blurry vision could only just vaguely make out the nocturnal cityscape.

The world swayed with her body. Something warm pressed against her back—someone seemed to be running.

She was naked, held in someone's arms. The moment she realized that, her body began trembling again, the shiver spreading outward from deep within.

Yet, strangely, she felt no fear at all.

Though she wanted to lift her head to see the face of the person carrying her through the midnight streets, her neck wouldn't move, and her vision remained hazy.

Even so, she knew exactly who was holding her.

Misae whispered softly:

Kumon... kun...

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Even Kumon Katsuki had his physiological limits. Despite possessing the courage to scoop up entrails with his bare hands to save a life, he still couldn't help but avert his gaze.

Several times along the way, he thought he heard a voice calling his name, but he dismissed the sounds as mere auditory hallucinations.

As a result, he failed to notice—

Each time his blood dripped onto the viscera in his arms, the skin was gradually regenerating. Destroyed tissue was slowly knitting itself back together; bone began to form, and skin crept back over the nascent muscle.

By this point, Katsuki's hands had gone numb, and he didn't realize the texture of what he held was changing.

He only noticed the shift in sensation against his palms when he was already standing outside the boarding house.

"Onii-san..."

Megumi had probably been watching from the window, so she immediately ran toward him.

Then, as he emerged from the shadows, she saw her brother's face clearly—along with the thing he held in his arms.

Megumi's face instantly turned bright red.

1. Scream.

2. Kick her brother.

3. All of the above.

As she struggled to decide which option to choose, she saw the serious expression on her brother's face and reluctantly set aside the choices flashing through her mind.

"Don't say anything. Just get inside, quickly."

Megumi took off her coat and draped it over... the completely naked Makimoto Misae in her brother's arms.

She pulled her brother inside the boarding house.

"Onii-san... what in the world is going on?"

"Well, to be perfectly honest... I am not entirely certain myself."

"What exactly happened for things to turn out like this?"

"It is a long story."

Seeing her unusually calm brother, Megumi thought that perhaps she really should have kicked him a few times after all.

"My my, Katsuki-kun, what happened?"

The moment they stepped into the building, Manager-san appeared before them with her usual impeccable timing.

"Good evening, Manager-san."

"Goodness, this is quite something, isn't it?"

Manager-san glanced toward what Katsuki was holding.

"Um... Manager-san, this is..."

Before the flustered Megumi could explain, Manager-san spoke first:

"The poor thing. She'll catch a cold like that."

From a certain perspective, it was an entirely reasonable response, one that left Megumi momentarily speechless.

"Indeed. I shall leave her in your capable hands, then."

Katsuki, for his part, responded to Manager-san without a hint of hesitation.

"Katsuki-kun, come with me. Megumi-chan?"

"Y-yes!"

"I'm sure you're very worried, but leave the rest to me. You should go get some sleep."

Megumi could only nod. She trudged up the stairs, looking thoroughly dejected.

"Would her current state be classified as ‘depressed’?"

Even Kumon Katsuki managed to notice that much.

"Don't worry. I'll bring her some warm milk a little later."

"I see."

"Alright, come with me."

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Manager-san opened the door to a vacant room. It had already been cleaned and prepared.

She moved with swift efficiency to spread out the futon, and only

then did Katsuki finally set Makimoto down from his arms.

"Turn around for a moment please."

"Eh?"

"It might be a bit late to bring this up now, but she still needs to be dressed."

"Ah, yes. Understood."

Katsuki's cheeks flushed red, sweat beading on his forehead. The reality of the situation finally managed to link up with his sense of social decorum.

"Alright, that should do it."

When Katsuki turned back, he saw Makimoto dressed in a slightly oversized set of pajamas, though she still showed no sign of waking.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

This proved to be quite a dilemma for Katsuki, because from an objective standpoint, what had just occurred was nearly impossible to believe.

"Providing a full explanation would likely require a significant amount of time..."

"Just a brief summary is fine."

"Very well... While I was en route to Makimoto-san's residence, I encountered her, and subsequently brought her back to the boarding house."

Under Katsuki's clinical description, the entire affair sounded remarkably ordinary.

"And was she already undressed when you encountered her?"

"Yes."

At that specific moment, she had indeed been unclothed.

"I see..."

"Um... Manager-san, what exactly are you doing now?"

"I'm laying out another futon..."

"Yes, I can perceive that much."

"Katsuki-kun, you'll sleep here tonight as well."

"Eh?"

"If Makimoto-san wakes up and finds herself alone, she would surely feel very lonely."

"I acknowledge the validity of that point; however, for a man and a woman to occupy the same room in private would, by conventional social norms, almost certainly invite ‘misunderstanding’..."

"A ‘miss’... ‘understanding’?"

Manager-san echoed with a playful tilt of her head.

"Well, as the ‘miss' in charge here, I assure you I'm quite ‘understanding’ of the situation, don't worry. Now, look—I've even found some men's pajamas for you. You'll be wearing these tonight; arms up, Katsuki-kun."

Incidentally, Kumon Katsuki did not possess the habit of wearing pajamas to bed.

"Even so..."

"Makimoto-san called out to you for help, didn't she?"

Manager-san's gentle eyes looked straight into Katsuki's.

"...Yes."

"In that case, it is all the more reason why you ought to remain by her side."

Kumon Katsuki could formulate no logical counterargument to her words.

"Now, lift your chin up."

"Eh?"

"You're injured, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Only then did he recall the wound dealt by Ignis.

Manager-san took out a first-aid kit and expertly disinfected the wound before applying a bandage.

Then her hands naturally moved to Katsuki's clothing, beginning

to undo his buttons. Her movements were so smooth and matter-of-fact that Katsuki nearly forgot to protest. Just like that, not only his jacket but even the shirt underneath was stripped away by her hands.

"Put these on."

His skin felt the softness of the fabric as the pajamas were slipped onto him. Katsuki hadn't even noticed when or from where Manager-san had acquired them.

Still dazed, Katsuki nodded. Just as he reached to button the top himself, Manager-san's hands were already at his belt. The moment the thought occurred to him that things were becoming problematic, Manager-san had already moved a step ahead, sliding his school trousers down.

And then, before he knew it...

"Now, lift your feet..."

At this point resistance was futile. He could only scramble to pull on the pajama pants as if fleeing for his life.

"Sleep well, Katsuki-kun."

Her voice was gentle, yet left no room for refusal.

Manager-san pulled the blanket up to Katsuki's shoulders and gave it a soft, maternal pat.

"Good night."

She switched off the light, plunging the room into darkness.

Once Manager-san left, Katsuki was left alone in the room. No, not alone; there were two of them. And therein lay the problem.

The throbbing in his chest was so strong it made him uncomfortable. Normally, he would never be conscious of such things.

Moonlight filtered faintly through the thin curtains.

Katsuki looked toward Makimoto.

He had never seen her look so exhausted, her expression tinged with a certain loneliness. In that moment, Makimoto's lips moved slowly. Though no sound escaped them, Katsuki knew she was calling for someone.

Kumon Katsuki thought for a moment, then reached out and took Makimoto's hand, interlocking their fingers tightly.

Makimoto immediately showed a faint smile.

Witnessing this, Kumon Katsuki felt quietly satisfied.

- 10 -

A girl who looked like a boy, wearing a hat, crossed the border of Saimatsu City.

"A very gentle wind is blowing."

She tilted her head slightly, and the magatama tied to her hair swayed with the motion.

"It seems I'm a little late."

Following ancient custom, the girl stood at the border and let out a long howl toward the night sky.

The boundless howl made any human who heard it dream of a vast, desolate grassland.

But to the non-human folk who listened with sharpened ears, it became a message.

"I am of the People of the Plains, a Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono. I have come to this land only to hunt that which must be hunted. I shall not engage in pointless slaughter, nor shall I return empty-handed. Elder, respond to my call. I am a Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono."

As the howl faded, the girl focused her senses on her ears and sniffed the wind blowing toward her.

Suddenly, a slow-moving gust of black wind drifted in.

The girl smiled and leapt upward. The wind gusted in tandem with her movement, and she soared into the sky, riding that gentle breeze toward the source of the black wind.

Chapter Two

- 1 -

Late at night at Kaitou Academy.

A small figure descended lightly on the ground. The blue-haired short-cut girl lifted her gaze toward the towering front gate.

Pitch-black darkness shrouded the entire school.

The dwellings of non-humans are known as "Sanctums".

The Sanctum of the girl—Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono—and her People of the Plains was located deep within the remote mountains and wilderness. However, there were also non-humans who lived openly within human cities.

They survived by drinking human blood, so people called them the People of the Night.

And true to the name...

A figure emerged from the night itself, silent as a shadow.

He stood on the inner side of the gate. His long golden hair made his pale skin stand out even more. He wore a haori, its hem and cuffs dyed a deep crimson.

"State your business."

The man's voice sounded quite young, yet his tone was stern.

"I am Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono. My mother is the Dancer Among Clouds, and her mother was the One-Armed Thunder Slayer. Dweller of the pitch-black night, by the ancient customs, open this gate."

The girl's dignified voice made even the night air tremble.

"Enter."

The gate opened with a heavy sound.

A Sanctum is more than a mere palace; it is a domain woven into a bounded field. Once she stepped inside, the girl's wind-born power would weaken, while the strength of the People of the Night would be multiplied.

Yet her face showed not a trace of fear as she set foot inside the boundary.

The blond samurai followed behind the girl as she marched forward with her head held high.

After a few steps, the girl suddenly turned her head and said:

"Do you wish to kill me?"

Her expression was calm and composed.

"Naturally."

The samurai's voice grew even heavier.

"A mere beast daring to request an audience with My Liege... the thought alone is repulsive. I would sooner cut you in two where you stand."

"If that is so, then bare your fangs."

Her expression was innocent, almost childlike... yet beneath it lay the iron will of a warrior.

"Unfortunately, My Liege ordered me to deliver you to him without a single scratch."

"You could just say I attacked you."

In the darkness, a faint moonlight glinted off the girl's claws.

"It is not good to harbor regrets."

The samurai smiled thinly.

"You are not wrong."

With a downward sweep of his sleeve, a dazzling array of weapons appeared as if by magic—a swarm of daggers, shuriken, a kusarigama, and a katana.

The samurai leapt, clutching countless weapons between his

fingers. The kusarigama swung upward from below, daggers and shuriken poured down from above. With his free hand he brought the katana down toward the girl's head.

The girl reacted instantly.

She caught the kusarigama with her knee, pinched the dagger with the fingers of her right hand, blocked the barrage of shuriken with her left arm. Finally, she snapped her jaws shut, biting the descending blade of the katana.

But this stalemate lasted only a heartbeat.

The samurai immediately released the blade and pivoted to kick the girl; she took the blow to her abdomen and instantly retaliated with her uninjured right claws.

At that moment, the samurai suddenly leapt backward, widening the distance between them.

"What is the matter?"

Blood seeped from the girl's knee, shuriken still pierced her left arm, yet she showed no intention of retreating as she raised her voice.

The killing intent that had filled the space between them vanished. The samurai tossed his weapons to the ground and said:

"I've changed my mind."

"Eh?"

"If it is you, then I see no harm in granting you an audience with My Liege."

The samurai curled one corner of his mouth into a faint smile.

"I see. Then let us leave it at that."

The girl smiled as well.

"What is your name?"

"Kanata Saemonnojou Yukinori."

"So you are Kanata."

She addressed him with such casual familiarity that the samurai couldn't help but frown, though it was only for a fleeting second.

"In the presence of My Liege, see that you are not disrespectful."

"Understood."

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono's reply faded into the darkness along with the samurai's silhouette.

- 2 -

"I have awaited your arrival."

Mercuriali Giovanni... the Elder of the People of the Night, stood upon the lecture platform.

"Sorry for the intrusion."

After giving a casual greeting, the girl sat herself down as if the chair belonged to her.

"It seems my subordinate behaved discourteously. I offer my apologies."

"I struck first. Kanata bears no fault."

"Were I so easily deceived, I would be unfit to shoulder the role of Elder."

Mercuriali let out a quiet, weary smile.

"What purpose brings you here?"

"I have come to take the ‘Gate’."

"You refer to Kumon Katsuki?"

"Yes."

There was not a trace of hesitation in the girl's voice.

"It is the wish of the People of the Plains. We require the ‘Gate’."

"And if I were to refuse?"

A faint sorrow flickered across the girl's expression.

"I am Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono. I am bound to uphold the

oath entrusted to me."

"Then I shall tell you, in my capacity as the Elder who governs this land: the power of the ‘Gate’ within Kumon-kun is far too dangerous. It must be sealed... or eliminated."

"Even so... I cannot violate my oath."

She bowed her head, filled with sincere apology.

"The People of the Plains devote their lives to their oaths."

"Indeed."

"And an oath must submit to an even more ancient covenant."

"Eh?"

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono sensed something amiss.

"According to the ancient covenants, one who encounters a person who knows their True Name must perform three deeds for them."

"You are correct."

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono was merely a tribal title. She and her kin concealed their True Names, for their real power lay hidden within them.

"If I were to phrase it in human language..."

The girl took aim at Mercuriali's throat.

She acted instantly, thrusting forward—but her extended claws did not pierce Mercuriali.

The samurai emerged from the shadows, taking the blow with his own chest. His body swayed only slightly, and that brief moment was enough.

"Wind that circles through spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Wind that crests the four seas, leaps the rising sun, and sighs within the dying glow of dusk. Follower of the Fourfold Winds, Bearer of the Key to the path locked beneath the ice and gale."

Every word that spilled from Mercuriali's lips carried a heavy magical weight; the pressure weighing down on the girl grew heavier and heavier.

The samurai who had shielded his master glanced toward him, a flicker of concern in his eyes.

Mercuriali paid him no mind, calmly reciting the final verse like a ritual.

"Beyond the North Wind's reach... Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono— ***Hyperborea****."*

By the time Mercuriali finished, the girl could no longer stand. She collapsed to the floor, unable to move.

To have one's True Name invoked was, within her tribe, a covenant more sacred than any transaction.

"Three deeds."

The girl barely managed to squeeze out the words.

"I will do three things for you... but after that..."

"A single deed will suffice; alas, I have no desire to lengthen the list of burdens I am loath to impose."

Mercuriali extended his hand. The blond samurai beside him immediately offered a leather collar.

"Obedience is a virtue as well."

The priest approached the girl, who was on all fours, and gently fitted the collar around her neck.

The proud girl accepted the humiliation in silence.

- 3 -

The sun rose in the east, and a new day began.

The one who opened her eyes a moment earlier was Makimoto.

Half-asleep, she was first startled to find herself in an unfamiliar room. Then she noticed her hand was holding onto something soft. Still groggy, she rolled over... and never expected Kumon's sleeping

face to be right in front of her.

Terrified to the point of almost screaming, Makimoto's mind raced, yet she still did not let go of Kumon's hand.

Bits and pieces of yesterday flickered through her mind: escaping, then fighting, then running again. Still, she couldn't fathom how things had resulted in her and Kumon sleeping in the same room... and holding hands.

Face burning red, Makimoto decided she had to find a way to get out of this embarrassing situation.

She softened her body to slip her hand free from Kumon's grip, then quietly slid out from under the covers. Shifting her shape as she rose, she used the soles of her feet to glide her body forward. Moving without a sound like this was something she was confident she could do.

"Good morning, Makimoto-san."

Just as Makimoto touched the door, a voice came from the other side. She froze, quite literally, exactly as the phrase "frozen stiff" described.

"Uh, um... I..."

"Good morning, Manager-san."

Hearing Kumon Katsuki's voice behind her as he woke up, Makimoto turned around.

"Kumon-kun, your pajamas... they're so cute."

His pajamas had little cat paw prints on them.

"Mm. By that same metric, Makimoto-san, yours are also quite endearing."

Makimoto's face went even redder. She instinctively covered her cheeks with both hands—only then realizing they were wearing matching pajamas.

"W-we're wearing the exact same thing."

Though the colors differed, the pattern was identical.

"Here you go. These are your uniforms."

Manager-san opened the door, holding two freshly ironed uniforms—one male, one female. Only then did Makimoto realize she was at Kumon Katsuki's home. She could understand Manager-san bringing Kumon-kun's uniform, but why was there a girl's uniform ready and waiting?

Deciding not to overthink it, Makimoto reached out and took the uniform.

"Breakfast is nearly ready. Don't you worry, just come down when you are finished."

"Understood."

"Y-yes."

"Well then, let us get changed. Would back-to-back be acceptable?"

"Y-yes... okay."

"Ordinarily, we should change in separate rooms, but there are inquiries I wish to direct to you."

"I... I understand..."

Makimoto took a deep breath as the rhythmic rustle of clothing drifted from behind her.

The underwear tucked inside the uniform... fit perfectly. Makimoto would have liked to take a shower, but she did not dare bring up such a request right now.

"C-can I ask something first? Why... why am I here?"

She pulled on her underwear as quickly as she could.

"Yesterday my phone received an incoming call from you. Subsequently, I discovered you while en route to your residence and brought you back to this boarding house."

"A-and at that time... w-was I wearing clothes?"

"You were not wearing clothes. Or, to be more precise, you lacked not only garments but your epidermal layer as well."

—The shame of this was beyond words.

Kumon's blunt honesty also meant sincerity. Had she not known

this, Makimoto would've already fallen into despair.

"Thank you."

"I merely performed an ordinary act anyone should do."

"Should do?"

Makimoto said as she pulled on her skirt.

She vaguely remembered: after the armor plates on her body were forcibly torn off, she fled into the sewers, then resurfaced, clinging desperately to the first warmth she could find.

She remembered being held in someone's arms amidst the cold wind. She remembered it all.

"I don't think most people could go that far."

"I will admit there was a moment of hesitation. However, providing aid to someone in a life-threatening state is, from a purely functional standpoint, a necessity. To me, that qualifies as ordinary conduct; therefore, it doesn't warrant your gratitude."

Maybe in words it sounded ordinary. In reality, it was anything but.

No—just like Mineyuki-kun once said, everything in the world can be called ordinary. If "ordinary" meant acting exactly as one's conscience dictated, then someone like Kumon-kun, who upheld his convictions without a single moment of wavering, might be the most ordinary person of all.

"Aren't you going to ask about... my body?"

"That would involve matters of personal privacy. However, if you were to answer my questions within a permissible scope, I'd be glad."

"Kumon-kun, we've actually... met before."

"Indeed, we are currently in the process of a face-to-face meeting."

"I... I don't mean right now... um..."

When was it? It had been long enough that the memory was fuzzy.

"Three days ago, Kumon-san was attacked by fishmen... I was wearing a mask then... so you probably didn't recognize me."

"Ah, I see."

Kumon suddenly understood.

"Thank you for your intervention. It was quite remiss of me to depart at that time without offering my thanks."

"Eh? Oh... um."

The fact that the masked red figure and Makimoto Misae were the same person was something Kumon accepted instantly. His lack of skepticism left Makimoto unsure of how to proceed.

"Regardless of the details, I have a grasp on the situation now. However I am very intrigued in how Makimoto-san ended up in that form..."

"That... that's a long story..."

"Just a brief summary is fine."

"I was captured by an evil organization called Strass. They... they performed experiments on my body and kept injecting drugs so I couldn't fight back. But for some reason, that day, I suddenly found the strength to resist... and I ran away."

Having finished her explanation, Makimoto couldn't help but let out a self-deprecating laugh. The story was so simple it sounded ridiculous even to her own ears.

"I see."

But Kumon Katsuki didn't laugh. No—she couldn't see his face, but his voice carried a weight of absolute seriousness.

"You must have endured more suffering than anyone should have to bear."

The words pierced Makimoto's heart.

It was such a simple, obvious thing to say—so obvious it was almost absurd. Makimoto laughed again, but this time, it was a smile through tears.

"I apologize... I do not presume I can fully understand the agony you suffered, Makimoto-san. If my careless attempt at empathy has caused you discomfort..."

Makimoto, halfway through putting on her uniform, immediately turned around—just as Kumon turned too. Their eyes met.

Realizing this was the first time she'd ever seen Kumon flustered, she laughed again, even as her tears continued to fall.

"I'm... I'm okay. Don't worry."

After finally squeezing out that reply, Makimoto turned back to fasten the buttons on her chest.

"Is that so? Good."

"Also... you're really... quite unfair."

"In what way is my conduct unfair?"

Of course—those eyes, the way he always looked directly at the person he spoke to, and the way he treated everything with such earnest seriousness.

"No, it's nothing."

"The phrase ‘it's nothing’ is a semantic contradiction. Events are constantly occurring; thus, I infer Makimoto-san is using that phrase to signal a reservation of opinion rather than an absence of it."

"I've... I've heard that before."

"Have you?"

This time Kumon laughed. They smiled at one another, even though Makimoto's tears showed no sign of stopping.

"You two... ready yet?"

Just as their laughter faded, Manager-san appeared once more.

While she didn't seem like the type to eavesdrop, her timing was suspiciously perfect.

"What are you referring to?"

"Did you two manage to get everything off your chests?"

"The dialogue has reached a conclusion."

"Yes... we have."

"Then take these."

Manager-san held a damp towel and a comb.

"Katsuki-kun, Megumi-chan's waiting—keep her company for a bit, alright?"

"How should I explain the current situation to her?"

"Just tell her that Makimoto-san had some family troubles and was being chased by bad people, and that you happened to rescue her while passing by."

"However, I am not proficient at lying."

"Is that a lie?"

"That... well, uh..."

Makimoto found herself at a loss for words. What Manager-san said wasn't much different from her own explanation.

"Logically speaking, what Manager-san said aligns with the facts. Yet, I must ask: how did you attain knowledge of these events?"

"Don't worry about the details. Megumi is waiting for you, you know."

"Mm."

Kumon was practically pushed out of the room. From the distance, Megumi's voice could be heard calling for her brother, followed by the sound of fading footsteps.

"There now, let's clean your face."

Manager-san gently wiped Makimoto's tears with the warm towel. But Makimoto found it difficult to simply accept such tenderness.

"Please, wait."

Her tone grew heavy as she asked:

"Who... who exactly are you?"

Then she suddenly remembered something.

"My name is Hanawa Momiji. I'm the manager of the Foredo Residence."

Come to think of it, this was the first time she'd heard Manager-

san's name.

"That's not what I'm asking."

"My, my. Well then, to put it another way: I am aware of the organization known as Strass."

The words sent a jolt through Makimoto. She immediately tensed, the arm within her uniform sleeve transforming into a whip, her fingertips sharpening like blades.

"Truth be told, I'm not very good at dealing with them."

"Eh?"

"Don't worry. As long as you stay here, even for a single day, I will keep you safe and sound."

Manager-san's fingers moved gently through Makimoto's hair, smoothing out the messy strands. Her tone, her presence, the subtle pressure—everything about her reminded Makimoto of the laboratory.

"Trust me..."

Ugaya had said the same thing.

"...is something I won't say."

"Eh?"

Makimoto's arm returned to its original form... a human arm.

"Saying this out of nowhere, you probably can't believe me right away. But promise me one thing: if you decide to leave, tell Katsuki-kun first, alright?"

Makimoto didn't know how to answer.

"That's... quite unfair."

She didn't want to trouble anyone, so she had intended to slip away in secret. But if she said goodbye to Kumon-kun, he would surely try to follow her.

"Indeed. Adults can be very unfair."

Manager-san smiled like a mischievous child. Makimoto let out a breath—this person was nothing like Ugaya.

"I understand. I promise."

"Thank you."

Manager-san suddenly took out a lipstick. Makimoto didn't even have time to refuse before her lips were being gently colored.

"Now then, don't you look much better?"

Manager-san pulled a small mirror from who-knows-where. Reflected in the glass was a version of herself that looked... a little prettier than usual. Her eyes were still slightly red, but the tear streaks were gone.

"Here you go, some eye drops."

Looking at this woman who cared for her so thoroughly, Makimoto sighed.

"So... who are you really? Um... Hanawa-san."

"Just call me Manager. As for who I am... if I had to say..."

She lowered her head in thought.

"Just an overbearing auntie. But I have lived a bit longer than most, so I happen to know a few more things than most, too."

That warm, unfair smile again. Makimoto couldn't help smiling back. She chose to trust that smile.

"I understand."

- 4 -

"Onii-san!"

Just as Katsuki opened the door to Manager-san's room, Megumi threw herself at him, burying her face against his chest.

"What is the matter?"

"Good morning."

Despite offering a morning greeting, Megumi still refused to let go.

"Ah... good morning."

As if confirming her brother's existence, Megumi rubbed her small face against him for quite a while before finally releasing him.

"What has happened to cause such distress?"

"I just feel like you are going to leave me and run off somewhere far away."

"I have no intentions of traveling to a distant location."

"You won't go somewhere where I'll never see you again, right?"

"I do not quite grasp the meaning behind your inquiry."

"I am worried about you! As your younger sister, I, Kumon Megumi, hereby assert my choice and right to worry about my brother's personal safety!"

"Understood. I acknowledge your position. You may worry as much as you deem necessary."

Katsuki found himself overwhelmed by his sister's intensity.

"Don't make me worry so much then!"

"I shall do my best. Now, what specifically is the source of your anxiety?"

"Who wouldn't be worried after seeing their brother come home in the middle of the night with a na... naked woman!"

"A naked woman... technically speaking, I was not bringing home a naked woman."

"Don't change the subject!"

"The facts differ slightly from your description..."

Seeing Megumi's fist clench tighter and tighter, Katsuki swallowed the rest of his words.

"I assume you have already heard the explanation from Manager-san; that was because..."

"It's precisely because she told me that I'm worried!"

Just as Megumi was shouting at Katsuki, the door opened.

Megumi cut her words short immediately.

"Good morning."

Makimoto greeted them with a fresh, gentle smile.

"Good morning. We were just engaged in a discussion regarding Megumi's concerns about my decision to bring you here."

With that blunt, concise explanation, Megumi deflated so much she barely had the strength to speak.

"Megumi-chan, I'm so sorry. Kumon-kun... Katsuki isn't the one at fault here."

Megumi, her expression stiff, took the hand that Makimoto offered.

"The one at fault is me."

Makimoto's quiet words carried a firm resolve.

"So... goodbye, Katsuki."

Hearing this, Megumi let out a long sigh.

The source of her troubles was about to disappear. She could finally breathe a sigh of relief. Megumi felt ashamed for even thinking that, yet she still couldn't bring herself to ask Makimoto to stay.

And as that thought crossed her mind, tears began to flow down her cheeks without her even noticing.

"I'm sorry, Megumi-chan."

Makimoto gently embraced the crying girl.

"I won't cause trouble for Katsuki or for you."

Megumi thought Makimoto was truly a kind person. But that only made her loathe her own selfishness even more. She was sure Makimoto had seen right through her thoughts, and was being kind to her anyway.

"Wait a moment. I fail to grasp the logic behind your statement."

A flat, blunt voice sliced through the harmonious mood.

"W-what is it, Katsuki?"

"Onii-san?"

"Makimoto-san just stated that she was the one at fault, correct?"

"Y-yes."

The melancholic smile on Makimoto's face faded, while Megumi debated whether she should deliver a swift kick to her brother's shin.

"From my perspective, Makimoto-san has committed no wrongdoing. Could you please specify precisely where you think you are at fault?"

"Eh?"

"Eh?"

The two girls spoke in unison.

"T-that's because... if you hide me in this building, it might bring a lot of trouble to you both."

"I can comprehend that. However, Makimoto-san is merely the cause of these events."

Makimoto was left speechless, while Megumi pressed a hand against her throbbing forehead.

"The cause and the responsibility are distinct concepts. Therefore, even if an unfortunate incident were to occur to me because of Makimoto-san's presence, the responsibility would by no means lie with Makimoto-san, would it not?"

Megumi let out a heavy sigh.

"Onii-san, what you're saying is certainly logically correct."

"Indeed. I am glad the logic is clear to you."

"Uh... that's not what I meant."

"Hmm?"

"You're right, but you're so inconsiderate."

"Why is that?"

"If you have to ask why..."

Megumi puffed up her cheeks.

"If something happened to you because of someone, Onii-san, I would hate them. Even if it wasn't that person's fault, I would still hate them forever."

"I see. So it is a matter of emotional subjectivity."

"Thanks a lot, Onii-san. I'm just so glad you ‘understand’ so well."

Her sarcasm bounced right off Katsuki.

"You are most welcome. However, it is not accurate to assume that harm is inevitable."

"But there's still risk, isn't it?! That's the whole point!"

"Your inference lacks logical consistency."

"Fine, enlighten me with your ‘logic’, then!"

"Hmm... Very well. If we continue sheltering Makimoto-san, it is necessary to factor in a high probability of death or severe permanent injury into our future considerations."

Katsuki delivered his conclusion with a completely straight face.

"You—!"

Megumi was beyond furious.

"But... like I said... as long as I leave..."

"Makimoto-san, stay out of this!"

Megumi was grinding her teeth in anger.

"Megumi, it is far too early to begin harboring resentment toward Makimoto-san based on a mere projection of risk."

"That's not the point! Why didn't you tell me you could actually die?!"

"I am telling you right now."

His reply landed on Megumi with the weight of a blow. She

staggered back a few steps, but she held her ground, crouching slightly with a face on the verge of tears.

Just as Makimoto was about to speak—

Megumi suddenly let out a loud cry, then sprang up and delivered an uppercut with all her strength.

"M-Megumi-chan!"

Megumi straightened her posture to catch her brother, who was tilting forward from the dizzying blow. She then cupped his face with both hands, brought her own face close, and pressed her lips against his.

One second passed. Makimoto froze in shock.

Four seconds passed. Her brows furrowed.

Ten seconds passed. Her fists clenched.

By the thirteenth second—

"You stop that right now!"

Makimoto rushed forward and pulled the siblings apart.

"What do you think you're doing!"

Megumi clung to her brother and shot back:

"Onii-san belongs to me and me alone."

"Indeed. Legally speaking, Megumi and I are siblings."

Their conversation was a complete mess of misunderstandings, yet Megumi still looked at Makimoto with the triumphant expression of a victor.

Ugh... I lost.

Just as that thought crossed Makimoto's mind—

Megumi gave Katsuki a forceful shove on his back. Seeing this, Makimoto immediately caught the wobbling Katsuki. He wasn't light; under normal circumstances, they both would have tumbled over.

But for Makimoto—Fantastica, with her bioengineered strength—the weight of a single adult was insignificant.

"I'm leaving Onii-san to you. If anything happens to him, I'll hate

you for the rest of my life!"

Makimoto said nothing; she simply nodded deeply, her heart overflowing with gratitude.

"I am finding it difficult to grasp the current situation. First, I would like to confirm the intentions of both of you..."

Katsuki stood up and turned toward Megumi.

"Onii-san wants to protect Makimoto-san, and Makimoto-san wants to stay by Onii-san's side. So I respect Onii-san's choice. Is there a problem with that?"

"Regarding my own stance, I have no objections..."

"M-me neither."

"Then the matter is settled!"

"Megumi, are you satisfied with this conclusion?"

Megumi gave a faint smile and lowered her head—no, she was actually curling her body to wind up her right leg, which she then swung with all her might into Katsuki's shin.

Katsuki collapsed to the floor, clutching his leg and rolling in pain.

Then Megumi marched out of the room.

Once the pain finally subsided by about seventy or eighty percent, Katsuki stood up and looked at Makimoto with a serious expression.

"Megumi frequently kicks me in this manner, yet the rationale behind it remains elusive. At times, I wonder if she harbors a dislike for me."

"That's not it."

"Is it possible, then, that she kicks me because she likes me?"

"She kicks you precisely because she likes you."

"Hmm. I would appreciate it if you could explain that to me in greater detail."

"Well..."

Makimoto knew the reason, and she knew how to explain it to him, but she couldn't bring herself to say it.

"You two! Breakfast is going to get cold!"

Appearing once again with impeccable timing, Manager-san's warm, sunlit voice allowed Makimoto to escape the awkward moment.

At that time, Makimoto, being shorter than Katsuki, had seen it quite clearly.

The tears that fell when Megumi lowered her head, and the way she wiped them away with her sleeve just before kicking her brother.

- 5 -

The smell of breakfast drifted all the way to the hallway. Perfectly grilled bamboo-skewered dried horse mackerel, miso soup simmered in a rich dashi stock, and spinach dressed with sesame.

Just by closing his eyes, Katsuki could visualize today's menu.

However, when he opened them, an unexpected figure was standing before him.

"Yo. Hope I'm not intruding."

The person raising a hand in greeting was none other than Mineyuki.

"Alright, hurry up and sit down to eat."

Katsuki and Makimoto, though confused, obediently followed Manager-san's instruction and took their seats.

"Itadakimasu."

The crisp, fragrant dried fish, the steaming miso soup, and the glistening white rice... with every bite, a tranquil, steady warmth spread through his mouth.

Megumi, who had been glaring at him earlier, finally seemed to have cooled off, and Makimoto, who had been acting reserved, began to relax as well.

At this moment, Katsuki felt genuinely happy. Though a lingering

pain remained in his leg, even that felt like a symbol of this happiness.

"Thanks for the meal."

After finishing breakfast, everyone sipped the green tea brewed by Manager-san, the mood around the table peaceful and warm.

Mineyuki was the first to speak.

"Heard the news, Katsuki. Sounds like you dove headfirst into some crazy mess, huh?"

"Yes, your assessment is correct."

"Actually, it's because I..."

"Don't sweat the small stuff, Class Rep."

Mineyuki waved her off with a hand.

"Mineyuki Ryou, man among men, ain't gonna pry into the details. Just lemme lend you a hand."

"It won't just be trouble for you alone... it will likely involve your family, won't it?"

"My old man's already on board. That Strass group sounds pretty nasty."

"Indeed."

"So there's some stuff I wanna talk over with you." "There is a favor I wish to ask of Mineyuki."

Mineyuki and Katsuki spoke in unison, followed by a brief silence.

"It's about Megumi-chan, right?"

"Yes."

"W-wait, Onii-san?"

"Currently, the enemy has designated Makimoto-san and myself as targets. If this persists, the probability of Megumi being entangled in the conflict is extremely high."

"Come to my family's temple. It'll be totally safe there."

Megumi lowered her head and said:

"I'll go... but Onii-san, you have to promise me. You have to

promise you'll come back safe."

"There are no absolutes in this world. If I were to give you such a promise, it would be equivalent to lying."

"I don't care if it's a lie! Just promise me!"

"If we both recognize it as a lie, does voicing it still have any meaning?"

"Of course it does."

Makimoto chimed in from the side:

"People make promises precisely because they can't guarantee they'll keep them."

"What is the logical basis for this assertion?"

"The future isn't absolute. No one knows what will happen in the next second. That's why... that's why people try so hard to keep their promises. A promise to someone becomes like a pillar for the heart."

"I see. So even if my words diverge from objective reality, they can still function as a support pillar for Megumi... is that what you are saying?"

Katsuki fell into thought for a moment.

"I shall exert my utmost effort. Is that an acceptable response?"

Megumi shook her head.

"Katsuki, man, that's exactly the kinda line dudes drop right before they die."

Mineyuki's comment was rather blunt.

"Just say it."

Looking at Makimoto, Katsuki chose to trust the resolve in her eyes.

"Understood. I promise you. I will certainly return to your side."

"...It's a promise, okay?"

Megumi held back her tears, gripping Katsuki's much larger hands with her own small ones, shaking them again and again.

"Yes, I guarantee it."

Katsuki looked at Megumi. The sorrow and pain in her eyes had vanished, replaced by a brightness that wasn't there before.

"It is a truly... unexpected sensation."

"What is?"

"Even though I have told a lie, I feel remarkably refreshed."

"That's how it works."

Manager-san said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Would the current mood in this location be defined as... ‘heartwarming’?"

Manager-san nodded. Makimoto smiled, and Mineyuki gave Katsuki a light jab, while even Megumi couldn't help but let out a laugh.

Katsuki felt as though he had grasped something important.

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The three of them stood outside the boarding house to see Mineyuki and Megumi off. The two of them got into a car sent from the temple and slowly faded from view.

Katsuki believed his decision was perfectly logical, yet for some reason, an emptiness lingered in his chest.

Just having her by his side had been enough to keep his spirits high.

But that heartwarming mood did not last long.

"So this is where you were, Fantastica."

In an instant, Makimoto's hand hardened—stone-like, even metal-like.

The woman in a crimson coat, the same one who had attacked

Fantastica without hesitation to save Katsuki.

Ignis, the huntress of non-humans.

"Long time no see."

Katsuki slowly took Makimoto's cold, rigid hand.

"For what purpose have you come here?"

"I'm a guest. I have business to discuss with the manager here. You two come along."

Seeing Ignis stride forward, Katsuki and Makimoto instinctively stepped aside.

"Excuse us."

"Oh my, welcome."

Contrary to her voice, Manager-san's smile was icy cold.

"Katsuki-kun..."

"Yes?"

The two exchanged a look, for they had never seen Manager-san make such an expression before. Sparks seemed to crackle invisibly between the two women.

"I'm here to help these two. You're going to listen as well, got it?"

Ignis's question was aimed at Katsuki.

He nodded instinctively.

"Is that so..."

Manager-san shot Ignis a sharp glare, but still invited her inside.

Ignis spread her arms with practiced ease; treating Manager-san like a maid, she handed over the coat she had just taken off.

"Nothing's changed at all."

Ignis—now in a black suit—murmured as she surveyed the room.

There was a faint hint of disdain in her tone.

"Yes. I am quite fond of this room."

The coldness from earlier was gone from Manager-san's voice.

That warm tone made Ignis frown. She sat down and began:

"Though we've met before, I'll introduce myself again. I'm Ignis, a huntress who specializes in tracking down non-humans."

"I am Kumon Katsuki."

"And you are Strass's experimental subject—Fantastica, correct?"

She exposed Makimoto's true identity without hesitation, her tone dripping with contempt.

Just as Katsuki was about to speak up, Makimoto gripped his hand tightly.

Under that sharp, piercing gaze, she answered:

"I am Makimoto Misae."

"Oh...?"

Ignis flashed a smile full of keen amusement.

"Anyway, what are you two still doing here?"

"Huh?"

"Is it really wise for a fugitive of Strass to be loitering in a place like this?"

She then turned her head toward Katsuki.

"Same goes for you. Strass has already taken notice of the ‘Gate’ power inside you."

"Megumi... I have already ensured my sister's escape from this location."

"Well then, that leaves only the manager over there."

Those words shook Katsuki to his core.

Manager-san... Katsuki firmly believed she would always remain by his side. But he could not let her be dragged into the battles that were sure to come.

"I-I..."

"Hey, Katsuki."

Ignis cut in at the worst possible moment.

"What are you thinking? Do you want that manager dragged into this mess?"

Manager-san spoke up, unable to stay silent.

"Don't twist his intentions like that... I...!"

"Shut your mouth."

"I..."

Kumon Katsuki thought: he had chosen of his own will to help Makimoto-san. That was his choice. And everyone had the right to choose their own path—so Manager-san should have that choice as well.

In theory, that was correct.

However... it did nothing to explain the heavy gloom currently filling his heart.

"If she stays here, that woman will end up covered in blood."

Ignis was clearly provoking him, yet Katsuki still answered.

"I... do not wish for Manager-san to remain here."

"Good. Then it's settled."

Ignis clapped her hands together.

"I'll teach these two how to fight properly. You step aside."

"Alright."

Hearing Manager-san's disappointed voice... and seeing her expression—

Kumon Katsuki couldn't help but feel he had made a terrible mistake.

He wanted to call out to her as she slowly stood and left the room, but the moment the thought formed, the door had already closed.

"What was the point of that!? What have you done!?"

Once the door shut, Katsuki glared at Ignis.

"I didn't do anything. This was entirely your own doing."

Katsuki clenched his fists in frustration.

"Listen carefully. From here on out, only hell awaits you. Do you really want that woman to see you suffering through it?"

Katsuki fell silent, a crushing sense of defeat washing over him.

Logic told him that everything this woman said was the truth.

"More importantly, you'd better take a look at the person next to you."

At Ignis's words, Katsuki suddenly noticed.

Makimoto Misae's body was rapidly losing strength.

She was slumped in the chair, her body stretching outward... her arms lengthening unnaturally. Looking closer, her fingers were melting like malt syrup.

"Makimoto-san!?"

"Shut up."

Ignis's sharp bark froze him in place.

"There's a lot I need to teach you. You'd better learn it in one go."

In response to Ignis's words, Katsuki could only glare at her in silence.

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Katsuki held Makimoto in his arms; her body was both hot and soft.

Following Ignis's instructions, he gently laid her down.

Manager-san's presence could no longer be felt anywhere in the apartment. A quiet dread crept into Katsuki's mind—the fear that he might never see her again.

"Makimoto-san... is there any method to save her?"

"She was originally an experimental subject of Strass. Under

normal circumstances, she would have been thoroughly brainwashed for easier control, yet she managed to escape."

"So... what follows from that?"

"There must be a reason the brainwashing on her failed. Try to guess it yourself."

Kumon Katsuki was not a person who frequently felt anger. This was because he still did not fully comprehend the concept of "malice".

People coexist with other individuals within a certain scope to protect themselves and their comrades; the friction resulting from this, and the subsequent unpleasantness, were within the bounds of Kumon Katsuki's understanding.

However, acts performed solely to belittle others, or behaviors with the explicit purpose of causing harm—this "malice" that goes from zero into negative territory—was something Kumon Katsuki could never understand. Such behavior was simply too illogical to connect with his cognitive framework.

Thus, no matter how obvious another person's malice might be, in the vast majority of cases, Kumon Katsuki would fail to notice it.

But in this very moment—

Kumon Katsuki could clearly feel the malice radiating from Ignis.

"I find your character quite repugnant."

"Is that so? Well, you better hurry. If you stall any longer, this one is going to die."

That malice gnawed at Katsuki's composure, making it difficult to maintain logical focus. Even so, he forced the words out.

"I possess no knowledge regarding her activities within Strass, but it is improbable that they would intentionally deactivate the brainwashing imposed on Makimoto-san. If this hypothesis is correct, then her actions within the academy are the key variable."

"And then?"

"The only explanation I can derive is the physical contact between her and myself."

"I see. So you two slept together?"

"If you are referring to sexual intercourse, no. However, we did have contact between our oral mucous membranes."

"Got it. That is the cause right there."

The logic and reason in his mind finally returned to normal.

Katsuki's flesh and blood could grant non-humans extraordinary power. Though Ignis had never stated it outright, if Strass's experimental subjects were also considered non-human...

Then perhaps that one brief, accidental contact on the rooftop had been the true beginning of everything.

"What are you spacing out for? Hurry up and wake the princess with a kiss."

Ignis laughed as if watching a comedy, then she swept her long hair back and turned her back to the two of them.

"Makimoto... san..."

Katsuki thought that, if possible, he would have preferred to obtain her consent first. This was his first time taking the initiative in such an act—an act meant to symbolize the beginning of a romantic bond.

But Makimoto showed no sign of waking.

—Do not hesitate.

Katsuki focused his entire being.

The limbs exposed outside her uniform continued to melt like wax under intense heat.

Only her face still resembled Makimoto-san's, but how long could it remain intact?

Katsuki drew in a deep breath and slowly pressed his lips to hers.

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Makimoto felt as though she was falling endlessly into a bottomless abyss. She tried to brace her feet against something, to reach out with her hands, but in this void there was nothing to grasp.

Her entire body began to dissolve; everything was about to vanish completely. First her skin melted away, then she lost her physical frame, and the very shape of her body collapsed along with it.

She was about to cease existing.

With the last remnant of her lips, she called out a name—the final thread of reason left in her fading consciousness.

Kat... suki.

Just then, she touched something.

It had a soft texture, and Makimoto clung to that sensation like a drowning person clutching a piece of driftwood. The feeling traveled from her lips to her face, then from her face to her throat, and finally to her toes and fingers. A warm current surged through her body.

Makimoto threw her arms around him, her legs entwining with his as her tongue tangled with his own—clinging with the desperate, primal intensity of an infant at its mother's breast. She was anchoring her entire soul to him.

Her tongue pushed deeper, and the boundaries of their bodies began to blur; her embracing arms began to sink into his, and their entwined legs began to fuse together.

Just then, she felt a sharp pain in her side.

"That will do, enough."

A cold, mocking voice reached her ears.

Makimoto endured the pain and finally regained her senses.

Then she realized the state she was in. She was clinging to Katsuki like a lover, their bodies pressed so closely together they were actually beginning to merge into one...

Makimoto hurriedly released Katsuki in a panic.

"I, I..."

"How lewd..."

Ignis sneered from the side.

"Ignis!"

Katsuki shouted in anger.

"What have you done to Makimoto-san!"

"You are awfully calm. You were nearly swallowed by her just now."

Makimoto lowered her head, recalling what had happened.

Her hands had sunk into Katsuki's back as if being absorbed, and their pressed chests had begun to fuse. Her body had craved Katsuki; had they separated a moment later, she might have...

Makimoto looked toward him nervously, only to see Katsuki glaring coldly—but at Ignis, not at her.

"Then you should have explained the situation clearly from the beginning. I find your attitude extremely distasteful."

As Katsuki stood up, Ignis suddenly took out a handgun and aimed it at his head.

Her movements were fluid and unhesitating.

By the time Makimoto noticed, Ignis had already pulled the trigger.

Makimoto—no, Fantastica—reacted instantly, extending her fingers toward the flying bullet.

But she was too late. Her fingers failed to intercept it, and the bullet struck Katsuki directly in the forehead.

Blood splattered, and Katsuki swayed backward from the impact.

Yet he did not fall. He steadied himself and straightened his posture.

Something fell from his forehead—a golden bullet.

After a moment of silence, Kumon Katsuki spoke first.

"I would like you to inform me of the significance behind your recent action."

Even Katsuki could not help feeling displeased after such treatment, and his tone grew cold.

"I am just answering your question."

"What?"

"It is better for your body to remember than for me to explain. I already told you there is no time."

Katsuki fell silent.

"I still find your character repugnant."

"Spare yourself the worry."

At this moment, Makimoto felt somewhat left out, so she quickly stepped between their lines of sight.

"Excuse me... what exactly is going on?"

"Experimental subjects are created by implanting non-human cells into a human body."

"I am aware of that."

Makimoto recalled the research institute—the countless syringes and IV drips, the scalpels, the bandages, the sterile white walls, and Ugaya's face resurfacing in her mind.

"Kumon Katsuki's body is a crystallization of magical power. If a non-human absorbs even a small amount, their strength will increase dramatically."

"So that is why I..."

"The brainwashing applied to you was likely undone for that same reason."

"You have mentioned those points already. What I wish to know is the reason I remained unharmed despite being struck by a bullet."

"It is an exchange. You possess the ability to absorb magical power from a non-human while simultaneously providing it."

"I see. In other words, I currently possess abilities identical to those of Makimoto-san. However, what was the rationale for suddenly opening fire?"

"Magical power fluctuates with the wielder's heart. If doubt exists, even infinite power is meaningless."

"So you intended to deprive me of even the opportunity for doubt, is that it?"

Katsuki let out a sigh.

"I understand. If I survive, I am an addition to your combat strength; if I had died from that shot, then one source of trouble would have been eliminated on the spot. Is that correct?"

"How delightfully perceptive."

"However, that shot was still painful."

At this moment, Katsuki looked unexpectedly endearing, and Makimoto could not help but smile faintly.

"Let me give another example. You there."

With a flick of Ignis's hand, a small black knife appeared. Makimoto realized it was a hidden weapon, but she could not dodge in time... her clothes were sliced open.

"Ah..."

Makimoto felt a chill on her chest as two soft masses burst out; Katsuki's eyebrows twitched in response.

Just as Makimoto was about to cover herself with her hands, her skin reacted first, producing a mass of soft material that covered her chest.

"Feathers...?"

Just as Katsuki had described, Makimoto's body was being covered by a flurry of light, floating feathers.

Even so, Makimoto quickly pulled her torn clothes back together.

"What is happening...?"

"Remember this trick. Your ability is not limited to softening. When you feel your body is about to collapse again, focus on recalling your original form."

"Ah... understood."

Ignis's overwhelming presence made her nod instinctively.

Katsuki stood up as if to resist that overwhelming aura and rebuked her:

"I shall repeat myself: I find your methods repugnant. Are there truly no alternatives?"

"Then I shall repeat myself as well. There is no time. Hate me if you wish."

"What exactly do you mean by ‘no time’?"

Just as Katsuki reached toward Ignis's chest—

"That girl... Makimoto, was it? She has only three days left to live."

Katsuki's outstretched hand suddenly fell limply to his side.

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"What is the meaning of this!?"

"It is all right."

"How could it possibly be all right!?"

This was the first time Makimoto had ever heard Katsuki roar in anger.

"Experimental subjects must undergo regular ‘adjustments’. Without ‘adjustments’, the body deteriorates rapidly."

"Shut up!"

"It is alright. All of this... I have known for a long time."

Katsuki stared at Makimoto. If undoing her brainwashing and awakening her will to flee the organization was because of those two kisses they shared...

"...Is this my fault?"

"No."

Makimoto's tone was firm.

"Didn't you say it yourself, Katsuki-kun? That one must not conflate cause with responsibility."

"Regardless, I..."

He wanted to argue back, yet no words came. Because Makimoto was correct.

"I always knew I could not live like this forever... but I just could not resist."

Her kindness was as clear and flawless as glass.

"So really, I should be thanking you instead."

Katsuki pressed his lips tight and clenched his fists. He had a mountain of words he wanted to say, yet no idea how to express it.

"Can you understand Megumi-chan feelings now?"

Hearing Makimoto's playful tone, Katsuki suddenly saw the light.

"I see. This feeling... is it misdirected anger? It seems I said some very harsh things to Megumi."

"D-Don't worry, Megumi-chan is used to it by now."

"Is that so?"

"Y-Yes, most likely."

Makimoto tried to encourage the dejected Katsuki. At that moment, someone cut in.

"Well then, Kumon Katsuki."

That arrogant voice dragged the two of them back to the original topic.

"Now you understand why there is no time, right?"

"...Yes. However, I still find your methods fundamentally repugnant."

"That is your prerogative. You are free to spend these next three days hating me all you like."

"Is there any method to extend Makimoto-san's lifespan?"

"Exert every effort to maintain her sense of self and continuously visualize her own physical form; however, do not expect much. It is little more than a hollow comfort."

"Using my flesh and blood... would that not work?"

"Experimental subjects are, in the end, still human. If you grant them too much non-human power, the balance will simply collapse."

"Is that so... in that case."

Katsuki lifted his head and looked upward.

"I have no choice but to fight Strass."

"No!"

The moment the words left Katsuki's mouth, Makimoto cried out in panic.

"To secure an environment where ‘adjustments’ can be performed, there is no other way."

Katsuki glanced toward Ignis as if to gauge her opinion. Ignis simply shook her head.

"But... I do not want you to fight for such a reason."

"Well, that is quite unexpected."

This was the first time Katsuki heard Ignis utter a sound of genuine surprise.

"I thought you were planning on seeking revenge."

"I think... it was because I did not want to fight that I fled from Strass in the first place."

"I see. I suppose it's your choice."

Ignis shrugged and turned her back to them.

"Do as you please."

Katsuki called out to Ignis as she was about to leave the room:

"What exactly did you come here for?"

"Because Strass is quite an eyesore to me. I thought that if you all killed each other off, it would save me a fair amount of trouble."

"...Then why not simply force us?"

"Meaning?"

"With your power, compelling us to act would be effortless. So why bother with these provocations?"

"Is that what you want me to do?"

Ignis asked cheerfully, sounding genuinely delighted.

"Of course I do not."

"Then stop asking pointless questions."

"I am inquiring about your motivation. Do not evade the question."

"Hmm... my motivation? Observation, I suppose."

"Observation?"

"Observing humans is a hobby of mine."

"Is it merely... curiosity?"

"Yes. A single human is terribly fragile, yet together they become powerful—and foolish. That imbalance... I never tire of watching it."

"Here, take this."

Manager-san appeared from who-knows-where, smiling as she handed Ignis the deep crimson coat.

"I take it that is my cue to depart."

Ignis donned the coat and clicked the door open.

Without uttering a single word of farewell, she closed the door behind her.

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In the silence that followed, someone let out a sigh.

"You two must be tired, yes?"

Manager-san gently took the hands of Katsuki and Makimoto.

"That person... is she an old acquaintance of yours, Manager-san?"

"You could say that."

"If it is permissible, I would like you to inform me of what kind of person she is."

"And if I say it is not permissible?"

Seeing Manager-san's wry smile, Katsuki decided not to press further.

"Though it is a bit early, but... would you like some tea and sweets?"

"Yes, I shall gratefully accept."

"Ah, um..."

"If you let your stomach go empty, you will only end up brooding over unhealthy thoughts."

"Th-Then I will accept too."

"Let us eat on the balcony."

The sunlit balcony was pleasantly warm, and the autumn breeze felt wonderfully refreshing.

"Katsuki-kun..."

"What is it?"

"I am sorry for not telling you... about my lifespan."

Makimoto began imagining how Kumon would respond.

(There is no need for you to apologize. Makimoto-san is under no obligation to disclose her private affairs to me.)

"If possible, I would have preferred for you to inform me sooner."

"Eh?"

The unexpected answer left Makimoto stunned.

"Makimoto-san, your life is of great importance to me."

"Y-Yes, okay... I am sorry."

Unable to face the intensity of Katsuki's gaze, Makimoto hurriedly

looked down.

"Here you go, thank you for waiting."

Manager-san carried a tray in each hand, placing a cloth-covered teapot on one side and a fragrant cake on the other.

"Please enjoy."

"I-I will help you."

Just as Makimoto was about to stand up to help, Manager-san had already neatly arranged the cups and plates for the three of them on the balcony table.

"Come, sit."

Incidentally, Kumon Katsuki remained seated with his usual leisurely composure, as if entirely accustomed to this.

"Well then, I shall begin."

The cake was a walnut cake with just the right amount of sweetness. Not only was the texture exquisite, but a hint of brandy allowed the aroma to bloom across the palate.

The tea was a richly brewed Russian black tea; in addition to the natural astringency of the leaves, strawberry jam added a perfect sweet-and-sour depth to the brew.

Makimoto let out a soft breath.

Then her eyes suddenly met Manager-san's. Those gentle eyes were the same as always. Makimoto gave a small nod, certain Manager-san understood her meaning.

Kumon Katsuki, meanwhile, was wholly absorbed in his cup and plate.

Makimoto decided to follow his lead. To ignore such delicious food in favor of chatter would be a sin.

"Thank you for the treat."

Having finished the treats, the two spoke in unison.

"It was but a trifle, I hope it was to your liking."

Manager-san poured them a second cup of tea.

"Makimoto-san."

"Y-Yes?"

"You stayed here last night, did you not?"

Right—she still had not paid for the room or the uniform. Her wallet... was of course not with her.

"In that case, you are officially our tenant."

"Eh? Eh?"

"If the landlord is like a parent, then the tenant is like a child. So you may rely on me as much as you wish."

Makimoto finally understood what she meant.

"Thank you... very much."

She wiped the corners of her eyes.

"Now then, it is necessary for us to discuss our future plans thoroughly."

Katsuki took a sip of tea and spoke calmly.

"Indeed. Makimoto-san, what is it that you wish to do?"

"I... I..."

I never want to return to Strass. I never want to be treated as an experiment ever again. But what I truly cannot endure... is the thought of taking a life.

"I... I don't really know."

"To claim you ‘do not know’ is a semantic contradiction. Logically, the human mind is in a constant state of formulating intent and preference at every waking moment. I am not asking for a viable plan of action; merely what is it you truly desire."

Another one of those piercing remarks. Hearing it now felt strangely nostalgic.

"Just tell us what your dream is."

Manager-san followed up:

"Something like ‘it would be nice if this happened’. Try saying it out loud for us."

Her dream. Her greatest dream.

"I... have always wanted to be an ordinary girl."

"First, the concept of ‘ordinary’—"

"Hey!"

Manager-san flicked Katsuki on the forehead. Katsuki looked baffled, seemingly unaware of why he was hit.

"Listen quietly until she is finished."

"Understood."

"Go on, continue."

Makimoto took a deep breath and continued:

"I want to go to school like an ordinary girl, talk with my classmates, have fun together, pick out pretty clothes, and... fall in love."

"That is your dream, Makimoto-san?"

"Yes."

There was another dream, but Makimoto let that one remain dormant deep within her heart.

"In that case, do exactly as you wish to do."

"Eh?"

"One can accomplish a great deal in three days."

Manager-san's voice remained gentle, making Makimoto's eyes grow warm.

"How can you possibly be satisfied with that!?"

Katsuki's voice laid bare the agitation within his heart.

"This is simply... too unfair."

"Katsuki-kun, everyone has their own happiness."

"It is all right, Katsuki-kun"

"How could it possibly be all right!?"

"I... I was a successful experiment. Compared to the other subjects, I am already far more fortunate... They cannot even see the outside

world, let alone go to school."

"Hey!"

This time, it was Makimoto who received a forehead flick.

"Just because others cannot be happy does not mean you should not be. That way of thinking is wrong."

"But..."

"Makimoto-san, you truly are a kind child."

Makimoto wanted to protest that voice that made her want to lean into it, but just as she opened her mouth—

"Makimoto should spend these three days in happiness."

"Ka-Katsuki-kun?"

"For that purpose, I am willing to do anything."

"You do not... have to..."

"This is a decision made of my own volition. You need not concern yourself with it."

"In other words, Katsuki-kun, you care a lot about Makimoto-san, do you not?"

Katsuki paused for a moment, then said with a flushed face:

"Logically speaking, that is correct."

Katsuki's answer and his expression were so utterly amusing that Makimoto could not help but let out a smile from the bottom of her heart.

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"Well then, now that we have a goal..."

"Shall we start by attending school?"

Manager-san said it out of nowhere.

"Eh?"

"Did you not say you wanted to live an ordinary life?"

"Given the current circumstances, going to school would increase the likelihood of being discovered by the enemy."

"Wait here for a moment."

Manager-san returned with two winter coats. The silver-gray fabric shimmered faintly, light as air, and the moment they put them on, it felt as though an invisible barrier had settled around them.

"There, now everything will be fine."

"I do not quite grasp your meaning..."

"Just think of it as a little charm. As long as you wear these coats, you will not be discovered by the people from Strass. At the very least, please wear them when traveling to and from the school."

"In truth, I still do not understand what you are saying..."

"It is just a little magic."

"I see. For me, magic is too far removed from my common sense to be credible; however, now that I have learned of the existence of non-humans, my common sense must be significantly revised. Therefore, based on our personal relationship of trust, I have decided to believe in the existence of magic."

"M-Me too."

"However, based on my personal curiosity, I would like to know why you possess such magical items, Manager-san."

"That is my private matter. I am sorry, but I cannot answer."

Having said that, Manager-san gave Katsuki a gentle push on the back.

"Go on, get to school. I will let them know you will be arriving a little late."

"We are truly grateful."

The two of them bowed to Manager-san in gratitude.

The two of them walked slowly out the front gate, hand in hand.

Once they were gone, Manager-san... Hanawa Momiji turned and walked back toward the boarding house.

"You are as naive as ever."

She heard a voice from behind her, but she did not turn around.

"I simply wish for those two children to spend their days in happiness."

"And what exactly constitutes happiness? Drifting passively through life?"

"I do not know. What do you think, Ignis?"

"There are those who die in flames yet remain happy, and those who live unbound yet spend their lives in misery."

"So?"

"Those two are not suited for ordinary happiness."

"Perhaps you are right. However..."

Manager-san's voice dropped an octave.

"If you dare lay a hand on them..."

"There is no need to threaten me. However..."

"However what?"

"Whether or not those two change their minds on their own is hardly my concern, now is it?"

"You..."

When she turned around, there was no one behind her—only fallen leaves swirling in the wind.

Chapter Three

- 1 -

The streets were still under strict surveillance, but it was not the police manning the checkpoints; instead, men in security company uniforms were inspecting the identification of every passerby.

"Is this the investigation for the serial murders...?"

"No."

Makimoto whispered.

"That incident is already over."

"Are you certain?"

"Human Flare... Strass should have already resolved it."

"Then what exactly are these inspections for..."

"I think... they are probably looking for us."

The two of them wrapped their silver-gray coats tightly around their bodies.

"Next person, step forward."

Katsuki silently handed over his student ID.

The man held the card and carefully compared it with the data in his hand.

"Sorry for the inconvenience. You may pass."

The man let Katsuki pass.

Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief.

Makimoto followed closely behind him.

"That man just now... he was a member of Strass."

"I see. This implies the magic has indeed taken effect."

Makimoto let out a sigh and leaned against Katsuki.

"Are you alright?"

"Let me lean on you for a moment... it makes me feel a little better."

"Very well."

Katsuki's simple, unguarded kindness was dazzling in Makimoto's eyes.

"Come, let us hurry. We will be late."

"You are right. Let's go."

The two quickened their pace; even so, their tightly held hands never parted.

- 2 -

"We are late."

The moment they stepped into the classroom, whistles erupted from all directions.

"You seriously only came back this morning...?"

"Wow, you two are really sticking close today..."

Teasing comments from their classmates followed one after another.

Mineyuki did not stop them, mostly because he saw the confused yet blissful expression on Makimoto's face.

But by the time Mineyuki felt he should intervene, it was already too late—Katsuki spoke first.

"No. Makimoto-san and I have not engaged in a sexual relationship."

The moment Katsuki uttered those words, the entire class period

was effectively doomed.

Mineyuki let out a sigh.

It was no surprise. Shiraki, the math teacher, was still young and lacked the authority to control a class of restless teenagers.

"Hey! Everyone sit your asses down!"

Mineyuki shouted, then climbed onto the teacher's desk, waving his arms to suppress the rising excitement.

"Fine, no point fighting it. Let's just have an interrogation session. Yo, you two, get up front. Anyone with a question, raise your hand."

Shiraki's face flushed red with anger.

"Ku—Kumon!"

...Geez, just turn a blind eye and let it go. Namu Amida Butsu.

The teacher ignored the delinquent-looking Mineyuki and instead called out to the (seemingly) model student Katsuki. In reality, however, Kumon was far more troublesome than Mineyuki.

"What is the matter?"

"Do you intend to disrupt my class?"

"I do not. First, I have not interfered with your teaching. Furthermore, in the midst of this commotion, the ones truly affected should be the neighboring classes. Your attempts to halt the disturbance failed, whereas Mineyuki successfully calmed the students. Considering these factors, I assert that I have not disrupted your class."

Kumon Katsuki was a man exceptionally talented in mathematics. During Shiraki's classes, he usually dozed off, and truthfully, he had no more interest in the lessons than the rest of the class.

"You—you—you..."

"Ultimately, when humans face subjects they are not interested in, their learning ability declines linearly. I believe that even if the lesson continues, the knowledge gained will be extremely limited. You frequently advocate that students must take responsibility for themselves, but responsibility and rights are two sides of the same coin. I have already mastered today's material, so would you permit us

to use this class period for self-study? You may begin the next lesson directly from the following section."

The onslaught of arguments left Shiraki completely overwhelmed. He hurriedly looked to Makimoto for help—after all, she was an even better student than Kumon, obedient, and a Class Rep trusted by teachers.

But he was far too naive. Makimoto's cheeks were flushed, and she clung tightly to Kumon's arm.

"Th-then, as a Class Rep, I also request that you allow it. We will take responsibility for supervising the class's self-study after school."

In the end, the majority voted in favor.

"Alright! Then it's settled!"

Mineyuki clapped his hands in celebration.

Someone, out of kindness, placed a chair in the corner of the classroom, and Shiraki sat there in a daze.

"Alright... then for the first question, let's hear from these two about how they met."

Mineyuki pretended to hold a microphone as he asked the first question.

"It is because we were assigned to the same class this year."

A stir went through the room, and Mineyuki told everyone to keep it down.

"Don't go causing trouble for the other classes. Right, Teach?"

Shiraki stared out the window and nodded with a face full of sorrow.

"Did you have feelings for each other from the moment you were assigned to the same class?"

"No, not at all. Initially, my awareness was limited to her name and physical appearance."

"M-my impression of Katsuki-kun was very strong, because... he is very tall."

In contrast to Katsuki's bluntness, Makimoto's cheeks were bright

red.

"Then when did you start seeing each other as the opposite sex?"

"I determined Makimoto-san was female based on her uniform, name, and physique."

"B-because Katsuki-kun is very honest, so..."

Was this what people called a married-couple comedy routine? From the date at the amusement park to the events surrounding bringing the fainted Makimoto back to the boarding house, the two recounted the entire process to the class. By then, the period was almost over.

"Alright, all things must pass. Time is almost up."

"Stand, bow, sit."

Shiraki drifted from the room like a pale, hollowed-out specter, stripped of his authority.

"Yo, Katsuki, Makimoto, let's head to the roof!"

Before the class could swarm them, Mineyuki quickly suggested it.

"I do not mind."

"M-me neither."

Makimoto's shy appearance left all the boys in the room staring blankly in awe. The girls didn't whisper any gossip either; this was entirely thanks to Makimoto's reputation.

"Then let's go."

- 3 -

"Sorry 'bout that, using you guys as a topic."

Mineyuki apologized as he opened his bento.

"No, I did not feel displeased. As you know, I am not particularly fond of Shiraki's lectures. That aside, Makimoto-san, are you happy?"

"Me...? Yes, I am very happy."

"That is wonderful."

Kumon Katsuki let out a smile.

"I still dunno what exactly happened between you two..."

"Hm?"

"But you two look real good together."

"Physical appearance is perceived differently depending on the era, culture, and subjective views; therefore, I personally do not recommend using looks as a criterion for judging others."

"That ain't what I meant... whatever, guess you haven't changed a bit."

"Katsuki-kun. Mineyuki-kun isn't talking about your features, but rather the expression on your face."

"Hmm... I see. So Mineyuki is fond of my current expression?"

Makimoto explained the meaning immediately. Mineyuki couldn't help but think that giving such a great girl to Katsuki was a total waste.

After finishing his bento in just two or three bites, Mineyuki said:

"I'm stuffed. I'll head back to class first, you two."

"Why?"

Mineyuki thought for a moment before answering Katsuki: "It's just my choice."

"Hmm. Since this differs from your usual behavioral pattern, I was curious and asked. Was that inappropriate?"

"Don't sweat it."

Mineyuki turned away. Makimoto... was probably hanging her head; he didn't want to see her expression right now.

Seeing happy people is a good thing; it makes you feel a bit happy yourself.

But saying he did not feel lonely would be a lie.

Mineyuki slapped his cheeks with his hands to pump himself up,

then chased away the students eavesdropping at the rooftop entrance before leaving.

"Makimoto-san, there is something I forgot to tell you."

"What is it?"

"When you were unconscious, I kissed you according to Ignis's instructions."

Katsuki stated it with a flat expression.

"Yes, I remember a little."

Makimoto began to imagine the words Katsuki would say next. They would surely be gentle and straightforward, which only made them feel all the more cruel.

...Although it was an emergency, I apologize for acting without obtaining your permission.

"First, although it was an emergency, I apologize for acting without obtaining your permission."

...Generally speaking, a kiss signifies a romantic relationship between two people.

"Generally speaking, a kiss signifies a romantic relationship between two people."

...However, as that action was effectively equivalent to a first-aid measure, I must clarify that it carried no other implication.

"The meaning of romance can be divided into three categories: the subjective level, the interactive level, and the social level."

Eh?

"Regarding the commotion in the classroom earlier, we may interpret it as the social level of romance. If you kissed me, or I kissed you, that would constitute the interactive level."

Only then did Makimoto realize something was off. Katsuki was speaking unusually fast, his gaze drifting, and even his face was red.

"As for the subjective level, the weight of the feelings I currently hold toward you has already reached an unreasonable degree."

"W-what does that mean?"

She could not help thinking this was impossible—something like this should not be happening.

"Deriving the conclusion from my words should be simple."

"I want you to say it to me yourself."

Makimoto looked straight into Katsuki's eyes. His once-wandering gaze now met hers directly.

"Based on the reasons above, both subjectively and objectively, my current feelings are clear."

"Katsuki-kun... please state what you mean clearly."

"I like you."

Katsuki was so embarrassed he blushed from his cheeks all the way to his ears.

But the shock Makimoto felt at this moment far exceeded his.

Her whole body went limp as she fell backward, and Katsuki hurriedly caught her.

"You... are not lying, right?"

"I am not skilled at lying."

"I only have three short days left... is that really okay?"

Katsuki held her even tighter.

"Possibilities exist at every moment."

"Then... that alone is enough."

"What do you mean?"

"As long as I have three days... it is enough."

Leaning against Katsuki's chest, Makimoto whispered:

"I will try my best to become the happiest person in the world."

"How does one define happiness..."

Katsuki had spoken only halfway when their lips met again. Their rising body heat was unmistakable.

Not even the cold autumn wind could cool their burning bodies.

After a while, the two slowly separated.

"Makimoto."

"What is it?"

"I was just contemplating the definition of happiness."

"But I was just thinking about you."

"In our current situation, the relationship between us aligns perfectly with the definition of happiness."

"So, your conclusion?"

"Right now... I am happy."

Makimoto cupped his earnest face and kissed his cheek.

- 4 -

During the lunch break in the faculty office.

"Mercuriali-sensei, there is a phone call for you."

"Thank you."

He had already guessed who the caller was. Despite the convenience of mobile phones, the other party deliberately contacted him through the school's landline, likely as a way to express their dissatisfaction.

"It is me."

A stern voice came from the other end of the receiver.

"I am currently working. If this is a private matter, I would appreciate it if you contacted me tonight."

"I want you to hand over Fantastica. She is company property."

"Our school has no student by that name."

"...Mercuriali. Her life is currently hanging by a thread. I do not have time to play word games with you."

"Koudaka-san, even if you say that, how am I supposed to hand over something that does not exist?"

"I am calling you personally out of respect."

"Even so..."

"...Fine. Then at least help us locate Makimoto Misae. That should be acceptable, yes?"

"Very well, I understand."

"The sooner the better."

Koudaka ended the call.

...Goodness. It seems they truly have grown desperate.

Fantastica was the trump card among the anti–nonhuman weapons. Strass could not afford to lose her.

...Perhaps it is time to take action.

Strass and Mercuriali—that is to say, the People of the Night—had maintained a delicate balance for many years.

Strass Pharmaceuticals used its vast influence to ensure that the predation of non-humans—namely, the act of eating humans—did not come to light, while secretly using large numbers of non-human folk as experimental material.

However, the moment Strass determined they possessed the military strength to completely annihilate the People of the Night, this balance would collapse.

The question was timing.

"Sensei? Mercuriali-sensei?"

"What is it?"

A poke to his back interrupted Mercuriali's thoughts.

It was the new young teacher, whose name he believed was Shiraki.

"I have to tell you, about those students in your class..."

He had come to complain. To put it simply, this man lacked confidence and pushed various problems occurring in his classroom

onto the homeroom teacher to solve, hoping to earn a favor in the process.

Such people were not exactly rare.

"May I ask what happened with my students?"

"Makimoto and Kumon both arrived late this morning... together."

"Oh..."

Mercuriali felt a faint dizziness. It seemed danger was already closing in on the People of the Night, and he began considering various countermeasures.

"See? If they keep this up, something bad is bound to happen sooner or later."

The man emphasized his point again, his expression truly unpleasant to behold.

"Being late is certainly wrong, but our school has no rule stating that students who arrive late together must receive additional punishment."

Mercuriali answered naturally.

"No, the point is that a young boy and girl were together..."

"Did they admit to anything themselves?"

"No, which is why I wanted to consult you first, Mercuriali-sensei."

In the end, this person simply wanted to absolve himself of responsibility. Mercuriali turned his killing intent into a smile, nodded, and said:

"I understand. Leave this matter to me. I shall address the matter with them personally."

"Then I shall leave it to you."

Shiraki turned and left as soon as he finished speaking.

—Now then, what should I do next?

At that moment, Mercuriali's mobile phone suddenly rang. It was Koudaka.

"What on earth is the meaning of this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Kumon Katsuki and Makimoto Misae. Their location."

"Ah, you mean that. My apologies for earlier. It seems the two of them were simply late. They are currently here."

"I would prefer it if you handed them over peacefully. What do you say?"

"If I recall correctly, your organization is not permitted to interfere inside the school grounds, is it?"

"That restriction ends the moment they step beyond school grounds."

"I believe if operating ‘beyond school grounds’ was enough, you would not be calling me. Need I remind you, we have remained neutral throughout this incident."

"Neutral, is it... I will choose to believe you for now."

"Naturally. I swear it upon our friendship."

Mercuriali let out a thin, enigmatic smile.

"Fine. Out of respect for you, I shall give you twenty-four hours."

Hanging up the phone, Mercuriali began to think.

As one of the People of the Night living among humans and choosing to become a teacher, he had done so because it was the most suitable method for him—allowing him to fully grasp the city's human relationships and use them to secure a food supply. The reason so many students were "transferred out" of Kaitou Academy was no coincidence.

Even so.

The mere thought of Kaitou Academy being engulfed in the flames of war brought a pang of pain to his heart.

"Mercuriali-sensei?"

A low voice made him turn around.

"Yes?"

"Is something the matter?"

It was the Japanese history teacher, Tada. This middle-aged teacher spent an entire year teaching only the Azuchi-Momoyama period. In his class, there was no Heian period, no Kamakura shogunate, not even World War II.

Although some academically-focused students ignored him, there were plenty who enjoyed his style of teaching.

"It is nothing. I am simply confused... wondering whether I should continue working as a teacher."

Mercuriali spoke his true feelings.

To Mercuriali, Tada was ultimately a human; though he did not trigger his appetite, he could barely be considered livestock. It went without saying that as one of the People of the Night, Mercuriali was much older than Tada.

Even so, Mercuriali regarded Tada as a senior.

"Well..."

Tada took a sip of tea.

"You certainly are relaxed, Mercuriali-sensei."

"Am I?"

"Yeah. Usually, a teacher of your age is already overwhelmed just taking care of these brats. Even if they worry about whether they can become a full-fledged teacher, they don't go agonizing over whether they should stay a teacher at all."

"I suppose you are right..."

Mercuriali replied with a wry smile.

"You know the term ‘negative example’, right?"

"I do."

"Students at this age will learn things even if we leave them be. That includes our successes and our failures. When you think about it that way, what we teach in class may not be that important."

Mercuriali narrowed his eyes. Of course, Tada's words did not include kidnapping and murder.

"Then again, that's just an excuse for me slacking off."

The middle-aged teacher laughed.

"How about it? Care for a cup of tea?"

"I shall gratefully accept."

By the time he had finished the tea, Mercuriali had made up his mind.

"Well, I should get going. I have class shortly."

"Ah, sorry for taking up your precious time."

"Not at all. It is I who have benefited greatly."

"That's good to hear."

The man smiled happily.

Mercuriali returned the smile.

- 5 -

On the way back to the classroom from the rooftop.

Their fingers were tightly interlaced, arms leaning together, a sweet weight resting on his shoulder, and a faint, fresh fragrance drifting from her hair.

Kumon Katsuki's mind was in complete disarray.

The brain exists primarily to solve problems. Since his body showed no abnormalities, there was naturally no necessity for the brain to function.

At this moment, Katsuki had entered a near-dormant state, passing every minute and second huddled close to Makimoto.

He felt extremely happy.

"Katsuki-kun, what are you thinking about right now?"

Makimoto's voice startled him awake.

"Nothing. To be precise, I am almost incapable of forming

thoughts that can be expressed through language or logic."

"Why?"

"Perhaps it is due to happiness. I never knew happiness could turn a person into this."

"I have been thinking about you the whole time, Katsuki-kun."

"Oh?"

"I was wondering whether our meeting was destined."

"I personally do not believe in destiny. The future should be filled with unknown variables, and what people call destiny is merely an explanation added after the fact."

"What does that mean?"

"A person encounters many turning points in life. Looking back, one might feel that a certain choice represented destiny. But as I said earlier, life inevitably presents many turning points. Once conditions change, ‘destiny’ changes with them."

"For example... a world where you and I never became lovers?"

"Correct. If the basic conditions and coincidences aligned differently, it is entirely possible that a romantic bond would have formed with Mineyuki instead."

"You and Mineyuki-kun?"

"No, Mineyuki and you, Makimoto-san. But all of this is hypothetical, and I cannot say your scenario is impossible either."

"Katsuki-kun... do you hate me?"

"I like you."

His voice was softer than he expected.

"Then don't you think that no matter how the situation changed, you would have definitely ended up liking me?"

"Objectively speaking, I do not think so."

"...That is exactly what I like about you."

"W-what are you saying?"

Makimoto's unexpected words sent Katsuki's brain into panic. His

mind switched from stillness to high-speed processing—though unfortunately, it was just spinning in place.

"You say what you mean without holding anything back. I really like that about you."

The spinning in Katsuki's brain finally slowed down.

"That is merely a functional deficiency. I do not know any other way to express myself."

Only after saying it did he realize—

"That being said, my previous answer was not entirely correct."

"Say it again for me."

"From a subjective standpoint... let me put it this way: I cannot imagine myself falling in love with anyone other than you, Makimoto-san. Of course, I could force myself to imagine it..."

"You don't have to do that."

"I understand. I do like you, Makimoto-san. That is a factual statement. However, speaking those words forces me to consider the future, and the projected outcome two days from now is overwhelmingly negative. That is the fundamental issue I am grappling with."

Makimoto's expression tightened for a moment, but she quickly smiled again.

"Katsuki-kun, you really do say everything directly."

"If I made you uncomfortable, I apologize."

"No, don't worry. I am very happy right now. Happier than my sister, happier than anyone else."

"By ‘anyone else,’ you mean...?"

"The other... experimental subjects."

"I see..."

Katsuki closed his eyes.

"I am sorry. I said something strange."

"Not at all. It fits perfectly with our discussion. You are talking

about the relativity of happiness, correct?"

"Eh?"

"Comparing oneself to others to determine whether one is happy—that is what you meant, is it not?"

"Eh? M-maybe."

"Seeing others suffer naturally brings sadness. But even if you yourself were to suffer, it would not solve anything. Therefore, you do not need to feel guilty about your current happiness."

"But if I am the only one... the only one living such a peaceful, ordinary life, is that not a sin?"

"It is not."

As he said this, Katsuki felt something indescribable stirring in his chest. Just as he prepared to analyze it—

The bell for class rang.

"Ah!"

"We must go."

They quickly picked up their bentos and, still holding hands, hurried down the stairs.

- 6 -

"Sorry."

"We are late."

The classroom erupted in cheers as the two of them walked in.

But with two claps from Mercuriali-sensei, the room fell silent again.

"Makimoto-san, Kumon-kun, I do not object to young people enjoying their youth, but please do not forget to abide by the rules. Now then, everyone please turn to page ninety-four..."

Makimoto, cheeks burning, hurried back to her seat, determined to focus on the lesson.

She straightened her posture, fixing her attention on the blackboard and textbook, yet her eyes kept drifting uncontrollably toward Katsuki.

The moment she closed her eyes, Katsuki's voice echoed in her mind.

'Seeing others suffer naturally brings sadness. But even if you yourself were to suffer, it would not solve anything.'

Maybe he was right.

No—he was definitely right.

And yet, something still felt missing.

While Makimoto continued to ponder, the afternoon classes came to an end.

One by one, the classmates stood up, preparing to leave the room.

"Ah, everyone, please wait a moment."

Makimoto hurriedly called out to them.

"We are going to make up for today's math class now."

Kumon Katsuki added, prompting a wave of boos to rise throughout the classroom.

"I am truly sorry, but we all agreed to do this."

"Do not worry, it will be over shortly."

After saying that, Katsuki's chalk danced across the board, weaving a complex web of logic and silver-white proof.

The students reluctantly returned to their seats.

"...That concludes the proof for this problem. Is there anyone who does not understand?"

"I don't get it!"

Mineyuki raised his hand.

"Which part do you not understand?"

"All of it, man, all of it! I don't even know what the first formula's supposed to mean!"

"That formula establishes the premise required to derive the solution."

"Ugh... keep it simple for me..."

Kumon Katsuki launched into a simple and clear explanation—perhaps too clear—while Makimoto stepped in at the right moments to assist.

After thinking for a moment, Katsuki picked up the chalk again and wrote another problem on the board.

"Once you solve this problem, you are free to go home."

Those who had already grasped the material solved it immediately, handed in their answer sheets, and left early.

As for those still struggling, Katsuki and Makimoto stood by to offer measured hints, helping them understand the parts they could not grasp. Katsuki's theoretical approach and Makimoto's ability to think from the other person's perspective made their teamwork flawless.

After about twenty minutes, only one person remained.

"Ugh... Mineyuki, have you ever actually paid attention in math class?"

"Mencius said: ‘If you climb a tree to seek for fish’..."

"Eh? Eh?"

"Is that your way of telling me not to have any expectations of you?"

"Whatever, forget about that for a sec."

Mineyuki lowered his voice.

"I heard that some people are doing weird inspections at the school gate."

"Oh?"

"Some unlucky dude who skipped fifth period got beat up real bad by those guys."

"Thank you, I shall keep that in mind."

"Also, Manager-san called me and said things don't look too hot over at the boarding house either. A huge crowd has surrounded the place."

"...I see... And what of Manager-san?"

"She's fine, but she didn't say where she is."

"Anyway, I talked it over with my old man. I'm having him book a hotel room for you guys."

"A h-hotel?"

Makimoto's voice suddenly turned strange.

"It'd be a pain if you guys didn't have a place to sleep, right? I mean, you could stay at my place, but..."

"No, we cannot impose on you any further. Thank you."

"Y-yeah, exactly."

"If anything else happens, just hit me up."

"I will keep that in mind."

"Alright, I'm out. Good luck, you two."

Katsuki and Makimoto bowed their heads toward his retreating figure in gratitude.

- 7 -

The two of them slipped out of the school through a hole beneath the wire fence.

There was a message from Manager-san on their phones, but since they always turned them off while in school, they had not noticed.

On their way to the hotel in the downtown area, they encountered several checkpoints, but thanks to the silver-gray coats, they passed without issue.

"It's so pretty..."

Makimoto could not help but marvel at the interior of the luxurious room.

Leather chairs, an ornate chandelier hanging in the living room, and the bedroom beyond.

"This is a suite, right?"

She had always thought the hotel towering over the station was simply tall, but she never imagined it contained rooms this extravagant.

Makimoto suddenly laughed.

"What is it?"

"When I was little, I thought suites were made of candy⊕."

⊕'Suite' (スイート) in katakana is phonetically the same as 'Sweet' (スイート).

"A candy house?"

"Yeah. When I was small, I thought a hotel this big might really have a room made of candy."

"Well, katakana does have its limitations when representing foreign words."

"Later, Fuyu-nee told me that it wasn't a room made of candy, but rather a room meant for a 'sweet' couple."

"A 'sweet' couple?"

"Like newlyweds, for example. So I always thought suites were places only couples would enter."

"While it is merely a coincidence, we are indeed a couple... what is the matter?"

Seeing Makimoto's flustered expression, Katsuki asked with concern.

"L-let's sit down first."

"That is reasonable."

Makimoto sat down on a chair in the living room.

"You must be tired. Is your physical condition alright?"

"I'm fine, don't worry."

After a few polite exchanges, the two of them ran out of shared topics.

Suite... a room for couples... the words kept swirling in Makimoto's mind.

"L-let's watch TV!"

"While I do not watch television, if you wish to do so, I do not mind."

Right... Katsuki really did look like someone with zero interest in TV.

"I... wish to spend a happy time together with you, Makimoto-san. If watching television would make you feel happy, I would accompany you."

"But... if I force you to watch TV because of that, I wouldn't be happy..."

"I see. I agree with that assessment. In simple terms, we must identify a form of happiness that is mutual, correct?"

"P-probably."

"How about this then?"

What Katsuki pulled from his bag was... a DVD case.

"Ah, that's..."

"This is a collection of famous scenes from Galactic Detective Beowulf. I purchased it by mail order."

Makimoto lowered her head, realizing she had forgotten to apologize to Mineyuki—she still had lots of things she borrowed from him back in her dorm room.

"I want to watch it ‘with’ you, Makimoto-san..."

"Eh?"

"I said I want to watch it ‘with’ you."

She definitely had not misheard—he had clearly emphasized the

word "with".

She lifted her head to look at him. Ah—he turned his blushing face away.

"Alright... let's watch it."

Katsuki let out a soft sigh. The gesture struck Makimoto as inexplicably cute, and she could not resist reaching out to pat his head.

"Could you explain the meaning of that physical gesture?"

"It means I think you're cute."

Katsuki's expression was priceless—he furrowed his brows, thought deeply, then nodded.

"Is that... a positive evaluation?"

"Mm-hm."

"Then..."

Makimoto gasped softly as Katsuki reached out and gently brushed her hair. Unlike his usual confident movements, this one was timid, as though he were handling something fragile.

"I do not fully understand the concept of ‘cute’."

With his face completely red, Katsuki said:

"However, I found myself wanting to do this. I do not entirely understand why, but it is likely one of the symptoms that accompany romantic affection."

Makimoto reached out and held the hand he was about to withdraw.

"It's alright."

"Right now... I feel afraid."

"Eh?"

"I feel as though I have stepped beyond the boundaries of what logic can explain. Abandoning logic and allowing emotion to dictate my actions makes me feel very afraid."

"Actually... I'm a little scared too."

Because this was her first time being in love.

"But at the same time, I feel incredibly happy."

"So do I."

"Just what is happiness...?"

"I think... there is no need for us to think so much about it right now."

"Why?"

"Some things go more smoothly when you do not overthink them."

"That is... complicated."

"It's actually pretty simple."

Makimoto stood up and hugged Katsuki, who was sitting in the chair. She could clearly feel his entire body tense up at the contact.

"Ah..."

Katsuki also returned Makimoto's embrace with a stiff, awkward motion.

After those long seconds passed, they released each other at the same time.

"Well, has your mind settled now?"

"While you were holding me, I was entirely incapable of thought."

"In that case..."

Makimoto decided to tease Katsuki a little.

"I should just keep holding you forever."

"That is unnecessary."

At first his voice sounded perfectly calm, but in truth it was the opposite. The faint tremor at the end of Katsuki's words did not escape Makimoto's notice.

"Let us watch the DVD. Yes... let us do that."

Katsuki suggested in a fluster.

"Sure."

Makimoto laughed. The admirable Katsuki, the strong Katsuki, and the Katsuki who occasionally showed a cute side—she wanted to keep watching all of him forever.

Just being able to stay by his side made her feel so happy.

"The first disc of the famous scenes collection... it seems they have selected five episodes from the first season."

"I have not seen it before. Shall we start from the beginning?"

"Sure."

Makimoto answered without thinking too much. Katsuki placed the DVD into the tray, and after the child-oriented promotional ads ended, the video finally began.

Episode One.

In a bustling town, a series of mysterious consecutive murders occurred. A massive black shadow lunged toward its victims.

A perfectly ordinary young man, Oozora Kakeru, who was working a part-time job, had his body torn apart by a pitch-black giant hound and fell into a near-death crisis.

The rain beating down on him slowly washed his blood away.

Suddenly, something fell onto him along with the rain—a single golden droplet.

It was the metallic lifeform Hrunting. It entered Oozora Kakeru's body and repaired his tissues.

When Kakeru awoke, his heart was full of confusion, so Hrunting began explaining everything to him. Once Kakeru understood the situation, the first decision he made was to defeat that "pitch-black giant hound."

He quickly found the hound possessed by Grendel.

"Not good, it is about to molt."

"Then what should we do?"

"Hurry and perform Blood Crystal!"

—Galactic Detective Beowulf completed his transformation in a mere nanosecond.

"Blood Crystal!"

Hrunting, the metallic lifeform coexisting within the body of Oozora Kakeru, decomposed the molecules of his physical body and reconstructed them into a combat form.

Muscle fibers were composed of shape-memory polymers; a neural network woven from reinforced wire gave his reflex speeds a leap in performance; and finally, the iron within his very lifeblood was summoned and refined, forging a suit of bio-armor that encased his skin in a cold, metallic embrace, thereby completing Beowulf's transformation.

"Deep Space, activate."

Time for everything except Beowulf and Grendel came to a halt, but this barrier consumed two-thirds of Beowulf's total energy.

In other words, Grendel's combat power inside Deep Space was effectively tripled.

"Hmm... this is ‘Needle’, is it not?"

"Eh? What is that?"

"It is a work written by a science fiction author named Hal Clement. The story depicts intelligent microorganisms parasitizing a protagonist's body to fight alongside him against enemies. To say nothing of Japanese hero shows, even Ultraman has a similar premise."

"I see."

Makimoto Misae hurried to carve the name Hal Clement into her memory. Of course, she also understood that with only two days of life left including today, she would have no time to read it.

Even so, Makimoto vowed in her heart never to abandon any hope.

The second episode featured the dialogue between Kakeru and Hrunting, providing a general understanding of the series' settings, while also touching upon the pain in the heart of a young boy whose beloved dog was brutally murdered.

The story then skipped ahead to the fourth and ninth episodes.

"Mm... the content is actually quite serious."

Makimoto's impression was exactly the same as Katsuki's.

As a child, Makimoto only remembered that "Beowulf always fought strong monsters."

In hindsight, the animals killed by Grendel's spores were never at fault; they were merely victims themselves.

Aside from the traditional battle scenes in every episode, the grieving boy who lost his beloved pet, the wild beasts that escaped

from the zoo, even the flowers and grass trampled by the roadside—the tragic fates of the defeated side felt even heavier.

Then came the thirteenth episode.

This time, Grendel possessed a human, and the human chosen was Kakeru's lover—Jenny Chiba. She was the only one who knew Kakeru was Beowulf and was willing to talk to him, yet now, transformed into a monster, Jenny attacked Kakeru without mercy.

This time Kakeru refused to transform into Beowulf, but Hrunting seized control of his body and forced the transformation.

"What is the matter, Makimoto-san?"

Tears streamed from Makimoto's eyes.

"If watching the DVD interferes with your happiness..."

"No, no, it is not that."

—Oh my, why are you crying?

She felt as if she could hear her sister's voice. Yes, that moment.

"I just remembered Fuyu-nee..."

"Is that a good memory? Or a bad one?"

"It should be... a good one."

Even after Hrunting seized his body and betrayed his trust, Kakeru still chose to kill his lover for the sake of justice. What kind of feelings had her sister held in her heart as she watched that scene?

"Galaxy Sword!"

Kakeru held back his tears and swung his sword down with all his might, completely annihilating the black shadow.

Deep Space vanished soon after, leaving only the human corpse of

his former lover—Jenny—lying motionless in a pool of blood.

If she had watched it together with her sister back then, she definitely would not have been able to stop herself from crying.

What did Fuyu-nee say at that time?

—I just suddenly felt that being on the side of justice is sometimes... very painful.

The ending theme began to play, showing the silhouette of a man walking toward the sunset.

The DVD ended there.

A profound, heavy silence claimed the room.

The two ordered dinner through room service, and what arrived were exquisite dishes Makimoto had never seen before...

"I miss the boarding house."

"Me too."

They exchanged smiles. Manager-san's cooking had a magic that made people addicted.

Having finished dinner, Katsuki let out a yawn.

"It is about time to sleep."

He said in a low voice.

"Th-that urgent?"

"Otherwise we will be late tomorrow."

Even though she had already guessed he would say that, Makimoto still felt a little disappointed.

Within this absurdly large suite, there were two bedrooms in total —one with a double bed and another with a pair of twin beds.

Needless to say, they chose the pair of twin beds.

When the lights went out, the top-grade air conditioning and blankets warmed Makimoto's body, but the unease in her heart did not fade.

"Katsuki-kun, I want to ask you something."

She called his name without thinking.

"What is it, Makimoto-san?"

"At the end of the video, the protagonist killed his lover... does that count as justice?"

For the welfare of the many, the few must be sacrificed—it was a necessary evil.

"Why do you ask this?"

"When Fuyu-nee saw that scene, she said ‘being on the side of justice is sometimes very painful’."

In Fuyu-nee's eyes, was Beowulf killing his lover considered justice?

"A Warrior of Justice is not justice itself."

"Eh?"

As usual, Katsuki's answer was entirely unexpected.

"What we call justice is merely an ideal. Becoming a Warrior of Justice is just an action, and the result of an action does not necessarily represent justice."

"That makes sense..."

"Even so, humans can still fight for the sake of justice—that is what it means to do one's best. Holding that resolve in one's heart... perhaps that is what makes someone a Warrior of Justice."

"Mm."

If I were Kakeru, what choice would I make? Would I kill my lover with my own hands, or let her live and bring disaster to humanity?

"If you were in that situation, what would you choose?"

"The conditions of the scenario are somewhat insufficient."

"Eh?"

"The moment you believe there are only two paths, you have effectively fallen into a trap, because in reality there is always a third path. Of course, one cannot forget the time limit while searching for

that third path, either."

"So... that means one should never give up easily?"

"Correct. I have not given up on your life."

It hurt. Those words struck Makimoto's heart like a blade.

"Why!?"

It would be fine to die in happiness, to become Katsuki's lover, then fade into his memories and disappear from the world without leaving a trace.

"Do you not wish to live?"

"That question... is too painful for me..."

Makimoto tried not to think, refused to think. She only wished to vanish completely, her whole body melting into the earth.

"Hope is ever-present. A person may alter the path they choose at any moment."

"But sometimes hope is so small that having none at all might be better, no?"

Kumon Katsuki thought for a moment, then said:

"You are correct, however, all of this must ultimately be attributed to the fact that I am an egoist."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"For me, personal happiness is my highest priority. And my happiness is to stay by your side for a long time. For that purpose, I will not abandon any hope."

There was not a trace of doubt in Katsuki's eyes.

"Even if I say no?"

"Correct."

He answered firmly.

No matter who he faced, he always said what he wanted to say without hesitation, and followed through—that was Katsuki's brand of ‘ordinary’.

"So I hope you will not give up easily either, even if the act of

hoping itself is painful..."

"Can I... take those words as a confession of love?"

Ah—he wavered.

"That... that would be fine."

Katsuki took a deep breath. Makimoto smiled and told him:

"Then I suppose I have to do my best too."

No matter what, a girl in love is invincible.

This is the justice in my heart.

After confirming that Makimoto was asleep, Kumon Katsuki quietly slipped out of bed and went to the next room. He gently closed the door, connected his laptop to the power supply, spent several hours searching the internet for information, and only then returned to bed for a shallow sleep.

Chapter Four

- 1 -

"Makimoto! Makimoto!"

Whose voice is that? Kat... suki?

Katsuki. Kumon Katsuki.

Makimoto snapped her eyes open.

"Are you alright!?"

She had never seen Katsuki look so serious—no, so panicked.

Makimoto turned her head, ready to wave and tell him she was fine, when she finally noticed the abnormal state of her body.

Her hands were gone.

What had once been her hands had surrendered their form, dissolving into a shimmering, viscous pool that wept across the sheets.

She drew in a breath and held on to her sense of self.

Recalling her original form, she restored her human shape.

Returned to her usual self, her calm self.

"Makimoto! Thank goodness."

She was pulled into a sudden embrace by Katsuki, who was rarely this emotional.

Only then did Makimoto realize she was wearing her school uniform, while the pajamas she had been sleeping in were pressed beneath her body, soaking wet.

"That uniform...?"

Katsuki asked with his usual concise directness.

"Ah, these clothes... it seems I created them."

Just like when Ignis had sliced her clothes apart—her body had immediately grown feathers. Makimoto had never noticed until now that her ability was not merely softening her body; she could seemingly alter her form at will.

"In other words... this is a part of your skin?"

"It seems so."

Hearing Katsuki say it out loud made her feel as if she were naked even while wearing the uniform. Ah, speaking of which...

"Did you see anything just now?"

Kumon Katsuki had lifted the blanket to wake her. If her body had already separated from her pajamas at that moment...

"If you are referring to your naked body, then yes, I did see it."

"Ah, a-ah..."

Makimoto's face turned redder than an apple.

"However, since several parts had already melted, it did not arouse any sexual desire within me."

"Katsuki-kun... that is just adding insult to injury..."

She imagined her entire body collapsed into a shapeless heap—being seen like that made her groan weakly.

"Please forgive me, for the situation was urgent at the time."

"I know. You did nothing wrong, Katsuki-kun."

Makimoto let out a helpless sigh.

"Is your body alright? Are you capable of going to school?"

Of course she was not "alright". She had never melted in her sleep before. Her days were clearly numbered, but she did not let any of that show on her face.

"Mm, I am fine now."

Makimoto answered with her brightest smile.

"Is that so? Then I am relieved."

She silently thanked the fact that Katsuki was someone who never doubted others' words—and hated herself for lying.

"Let us go to school."

Makimoto took Katsuki's offered hand. The warmth of his hand turned into happiness, warming her entire body.

"Yes!"

This time, Makimoto smiled for real.

- 2 -

Even though it was morning, the chapel felt dim. Sunlight filtered through the stained glass, scattering into shifting patches of color.

Within those wavering rainbow reflections, Mercuriali stood alone at the lectern, a golden chain in his hand.

"Hail, our lady in Darkness."

Mercuriali chanted in a resonant voice.

"The Lords are with thee."

"Blessed art thou among Nephilim."

"And cursed is the Forbidden Fruit."

"Our lady of Darkness, pray for us, Nephilim."

"Now and at the end time."

"Amen."

The golden chain reacted to the incantation and began to glow. Attached to its end was an old book. On its leather cover, one could barely make out the letters "Megapolisomancy."

The book suddenly opened on its own, and lines of text surfaced on the exposed pages.

This book is a relic that governs Knowledge, once wielded by The Deepest Hunger, one of the three Guardians of Humanity.

Within the entire Kaitou Academy—and even the whole city of Saimatsu—there was nothing that could be hidden from Mercuriali. The true names of the People of the Plains, the thoughts of the man and woman in silver-gray coats, even the strategies of Strass—none of it could escape him.

Mercuriali flipped through a few pages, then frowned slightly.

- 3 -

"It feels... a little scary."

Makimoto murmured on the way to school.

"Indeed. The inspections have become increasingly strict."

Katsuki replied.

"It is not just that... everyone looks so tense."

"I see. Since ordinary citizens do not know the serial murders have already ended, it is natural for them to feel pressure."

"Yeah, I guess that's it."

"If only there were a way to inform them of the truth."

Katsuki began thinking seriously, while Makimoto sighed with a distant look.

In any case, the silver-gray coats once again allowed the two of them to pass the inspection smoothly.

"Hey there!"

An energetic voice called out from the side.

"Oh, it is Mineyuki. You look lively. Did something good happen?"

"I'm just greeting you, man!"

"Good morning, Mineyuki-kun."

Makimoto Misae bowed deeply, full of gratitude.

"I am sorry about the things I borrowed before... um..."

"Ah, don't worry about that."

Mineyuki brushed it off with a hearty laugh.

"Has something happened?"

Kumon Katsuki—still incapable of reading the mood—asked.

"Don't worry about it."

"Understood. I will not worry about it."

As expected of Mineyuki, he knew exactly how to communicate with Katsuki.

"...Anyway, I cannot shake the feeling that something is off."

"Mineyuki-kun... you are not even going to ask me what is going on?"

"Look, if ventin' helps, I'm all ears... but that guy's the one you should be talking to, not me."

He pressed his thumb and index finger to his chin—apparently his signature "cool guy" pose.

"I have already heard her explanation. Therefore, there is no need for Mineyuki to hear it as well."

"W-wait, Katsuki-kun."

"Don't sweat it. As Confucius said: ‘To see what is right and not do it is a lack of courage.’"

"Mineyuki-kun, you really are a good person."

"There is certainly no doubt about that."

Mineyuki did a double-take, then asked with exaggerated concern:

"Makimoto... have you been hanging around Katsuki too much?"

"Eh?"

"Bluntly saying exactly what is on your mind like that—you are turning into him."

"Well... I just felt like being honest might not be so bad."

"Correct. It is a positive development."

"Alright, alright, I am full! I can't take it any more!"

"Full? Did you eat something just now?"

"No, Katsuki-kun. It is a figure of speech. He means he has had his fill of watching us flirt..."

Mineyuki placed a hand on Makimoto's shoulder.

"Makimoto, I am begging you—keep at least a little common sense. If there were two Katsukis in this world, I would literally drop dead."

"Ah, sorry."

Makimoto smiled happily. Being told she was becoming more like Katsuki made her feel warm inside.

- 4 -

It had been two days since they became a couple. As soon as Makimoto and Katsuki entered the classroom, they were immediately pulled aside—Makimoto by the girls, Katsuki by the boys.

Her classmates surrounded her, firing questions one after another:

"What did you two do yesterday?"

"What's so great about Kumon-kun anyway?"

"Kumon seems kind of slow to mature—how far have you two gone?"

"Hey, Maki-chan, how serious are you two planning to get?"

Ordinary conversations—spoken by classmates who believed their Class Rep would still be here tomorrow—felt incredibly warm to Makimoto.

She wanted to protect this happiness. She wished for it from the bottom of her heart.

She awkwardly answered each question one by one, then turned to check on Katsuki.

"Yesterday? Yesterday, Makimoto-san and I stayed overnight at a hotel."

Screams and shouts exploded through the classroom in an instant.

"Quiet, everyone be quiet—"

Makimoto tried to fulfill her duty as Class Rep, while Mineyuki waved his hands frantically, and Katsuki sat in his seat, completely unmoved by the commotion.

The sight made Makimoto tear up with joy.

"Ah, Maki-chan is crying!"

"Who made her cry?"

"Mineyuki, you went too far."

"H-how is this my fault!"

The chaos only grew, and Makimoto's tears would not stop.

Today's lessons would be her very last. She had to give them her all—Makimoto silently resolved.

- 5 -

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono stood on the rooftop, letting her body feel the winds sweeping through the town.

"Is something the matter?"

Mercuriali asked.

"Loathsome winds keep blowing. Winds of sorrow, winds of terror... and greasy winds, winds that reek of rust."

"Once people seeking power gather, it naturally becomes like that."

She looked down. Countless armored vehicles had gathered

outside the school gate.

"I really want to eat Katsuki, but I hate these winds even more. I do not mind fighting them. Is that what you want me to do?"

"No, you are my trump card. Wait just a little longer."

"I see."

The girl wearing the collar lay down.

"Will you be alright alone?"

"I am not alone."

Mercuriali smiled faintly. He stepped over the rooftop railing and descended lightly to the ground.

- 6 -

Mercuriali stood before the main gate—the boundary point between the Sanctum and the city.

"It appears you all belong to Strass."

"Is that you, Mercuriali? Step aside."

Koudaka's voice crackled through a megaphone.

"What business brings you all the way to this school?"

"Hand over Makimoto Misae immediately."

"I have no desire to obstruct Strass. However, her presence here is entirely a matter of her own volition."

"Then open the gate."

"As a teacher whose duty is to maintain order within this academy, I find myself unable to entertain such a request."

"...If you refuse to move..."

Koudaka paused for a moment.

The gate before Mercuriali suddenly swung open.

Soldiers clad in combat gear charged into the school one after another.

"Do not move!"

Mercuriali shouted, his pupils glowing red. With just that single cry, the invading soldiers all collapsed to the ground, unable to rise.

"Do you intend to resist?"

Koudaka's voice carried a hint of sorrow.

"Resist? My every action is already an expression of victory."

"Have you forgotten it is daytime?"

The People of the Night—just as their name implied, they were non-human folk who lived in darkness. Sunlight would burn them to ash. The only reason Mercuriali was unaffected was because he stood within this "Sanctum" known as the Kaitou Academy.

"And what of it?"

Mercuriali crossed the threshold. The sun instantly set his silhouette ablaze.

Although the soldiers were intimidated by his actions, they immediately raised their weapons and began to fire. The humanoid blaze began to run, weaving through countless bullets and striking each soldier squarely in the chest.

The soldiers began to retreat, swapping positions with the armored vehicles.

"My Liege, please allow me to accompany you in battle."

The blond samurai emerged from Mercuriali's shadow, flames wrapping around him as well.

"Do not overexert yourself, Yukinori."

"I understand. However, this rabble is scarcely worthy of claiming my life."

The samurai drew a massive spear from his robes. The burning spear pierced the armored plating of a vehicle, causing the engine—its heart—to ignite and explode.

Black smoke and fire burst skyward. Soldiers who escaped rolled

on the ground, their bodies aflame.

Only two figures of fire stood unharmed.

"Hmph. So you are using non-human magic. In that case..."

A giant stepped down from an armored vehicle. His massive armored suit sealed him completely, and he wore an expressionless white mask.

"N4 Singularity... They really are underestimating us."

"I think he is a perfectly suitable opponent for ‘The Strongest’ Mercuriali."

"It seems you still understand nothing."

His exhaled breath was laced with sparks as Mercuriali spoke slowly.

"We, the People of the Night, are an exceedingly fragile lineage."

Non-human magic was proportional to the power of conviction. Believe yourself strong, and you grew strong. Believe yourself undefeated, and you will never know defeat. That was how non-human folk lived. They had no effort, no hesitation, no doubt.

But...

The People of the Night were incredibly frail. They could not even withstand sunlight. Their meager strength was barely enough to sustain themselves by drinking human blood. So they trained themselves. They understood their own weakness, and used their immortal lifespans to thoroughly strengthen themselves.

They had no innate combat skills. Everything must be learned and honed from scratch, mastering human killing techniques, strategy, and political maneuvering.

However, did that not make them the same as humans? To other non-humans, they were no different from mankind—merely a group of half-measures who have discarded their pride.

Hunted by humans and shunned by non-humans, yet the People of the Night still clung to life.

When the youngest among them—a youth barely over a hundred

years old—became an Elder, people began calling him this, half in mockery:

"The Strongest Mercuriali."

Before anyone knew it, the joke stopped being a joke. The origin of the nickname was forgotten, leaving behind only the title: "The Strongest."

Yet Mercuriali never forgot that the People of the Night are weak.

"'The Weakest' Mercuriali... shall answer the call."

Sunlight gnawed at his entire body, but he turned the agony of burning flesh into momentum and charged forward.

N4 Singularity swung his massive fist. His body was as hard as diamond—no spear, no matter how sharp, could pierce it.

Mercuriali slipped silently into the Singularity's guard. He parried the fist, then used the momentum to seize the moment the giant lost his balance, delivering a kick to his lower body.

The man's massive frame was suddenly hoisted into the air, then crashed headfirst into the ground, carving out a deep crater.

The fallen Singularity immediately rose. His reinforced skull and brain made fainting nearly impossible.

Yukinori glanced at Mercuriali. Under the sunlight, both he and his Liege could last only one more minute.

One minute would be enough to completely disable all the armored vehicles.

But what about that behemoth?

Mercuriali signaled Yukinori with his eyes to stay back.

The giant known as the N4 Singularity launched a second attack, stretching out two thick arms to crush Mercuriali. Mercuriali evaded the attack with grace, then gave the giant's back a push, forcing him to kiss the ground once more.

"Is this all you have?"

Mercuriali said.

"Hard, slow, dull. Is this truly the extent of an experimental subject—the pinnacle of human intelligence?"

N4 Singularity seemed to understand that the man before him was taunting him. He took massive strides and began to run, each footfall gouging holes into the asphalt. The giant's acceleration was abnormally fast as he attempted to ram Mercuriali with his head.

"Stop! Stop right now!"

Unfortunately, Koudaka's warning came too late.

Mercuriali stood his ground against the incoming threat. He raised both hands, then ripped his clenched fists apart in a swift outward arc.

The battle ended just like that.

In the split second the giant charged between Mercuriali's hands, his head suddenly slid off.

The head rolled across the ground several times before coming to a halt.

Mercuriali easily sidestepped the headless body as it continued forward.

The body walked about ten more steps before collapsing with a thunderous crash.

"What did you just do?"

"Come, Yukinori."

"Yes."

Yukinori delivered a final blow to the last armored vehicle. The voice coming from the megaphone vanished along with it.

The two walked back into the academy, the flames around them gradually fading.

Mercuriali let out a sigh. Koudaka must be furious right now—the weapon designed to counter non-humans had failed to defeat one.

Mercuriali had not used any non-human power from start to finish. The only thing he used on Singularity was nano-carbon threads —too thin for the human eye to see, yet tougher than diamond. Incidentally, Strass also used such weapons in their anti–nonhuman arsenal.

Mercuriali's power as a non-human could be called the weakest, yet he had never suffered a fatal wound, nor had he ever lost to the same opponent twice. Of course, he never challenged an opponent who was stronger than himself.

"Perhaps I did a bit too much."

His objective had never changed; everything was for the protection of the People of the Night. The reason he did not hand Kumon Katsuki and Makimoto Misae over to Strass was for self-preservation, diplomacy, and to maintain the delicate balance between the two sides.

Even so, he could not help but feel that what he had just done was a bit reckless.

His steps faltered. Yukinori immediately reached out to support him.

"I have troubled you."

"Not at all."

Master and servant leaned on each other as they walked toward the chapel.

- 7 -

Hearing the sound of explosions from the school gate, the students in the classroom all rushed to the windows to see what was happening.

There were only three exceptions: Makimoto, Katsuki, and Mineyuki.

As the Class Rep, Makimoto wanted to calm the commotion.

Katsuki was still deep in thought regarding matters of love.

And Mineyuki was on his cell phone.

"Ah... Dad? I can't hear you, speak up! Huh? How'd that happen?"

His expression suddenly changed. He hung up and turned to Katsuki and Makimoto.

"Hey, Makimoto, Katsuki."

Both turned around.

"Get out of this city. Now."

"Eh? Why?"

"Has something occurred?"

"You two got named as the culprits for those serial killings. It was on TV just now."

"Eh?"

"I see."

Upon hearing this, Makimoto immediately looked worried, but Katsuki remained pensive.

"Anyway, get out of here. Go hide at my family's temple for a while. You should be able to evade them there."

"We cannot... that's too much trouble for your family."

"My old man literally called to tell you guys to go there. Don't worry about it."

"Very well. Then we shall accept."

"Wait... Katsuki-kun!"

"Makimoto, judging by the current circumstances, it is best that we depart as soon as possible."

"Ah—okay."

Makimoto.

Not Makimoto-san. Just Makimoto.

He did not call me Makimoto-san; he called me Makimoto.

She still did not fully grasp the gravity of the entire situation, but that alone made her happy. Thus, she made up her mind to run away with Katsuki.

"Mineyuki-kun, are you not coming with us?"

"Old man said it'd be bad if anyone caught me moving with you guys."

"An alibi, then."

Katsuki immediately understood his intention.

It was more advantageous for their side to let the enemy think Makimoto and Katsuki were still in the school. With things this chaotic, two missing students would go unnoticed.

Mineyuki leaned toward the window and deliberately shouted:

"Whoa...! That's crazy!"

Makimoto opened the classroom door to escape into the hallway, and before leaving, she nodded in gratitude to Mineyuki's back.

- 8 -

Even though the entire school had its attention fixed on the scene outside the windows, the hallway was unnaturally quiet.

Aside from Katsuki and Makimoto, there was one other figure.

A man with thinning hair, wearing a suit, looking to be around forty, holding a paper bag in his hand.

"May I ask if you are Kumon Katsuki-sama and Makimoto Misae-sama?"

"We are."

Katsuki answered the man's question as Makimoto took a step forward.

"Be careful."

She whispered to Katsuki. There was something familiar about the man... it was non-human magic. This frail-looking man was not human.

"Oh dear, please do not misunderstand. I bear you no ill will."

The man leaned back with an exaggerated motion, his curtain-like bangs swaying from side to side.

Even faced with the comical sight, Makimoto did not lower her guard.

"What business do you have with us?"

Katsuki asked calmly.

"I was sent to bring these to you."

The man pulled two silver-gray coats out of the paper bag.

Makimoto and Katsuki exchanged a look. Ever since arriving at the school, those coats had stayed untouched in their lockers.

"For the journey ahead, it would be wise to proceed while wearing these."

"Thank you."

Katsuki thanked him.

"May I ask... who are you?"

Makimoto asked cautiously.

"You can call me Tanaka. You may think of me as a subordinate of Lord Mercuriali."

"Mercuriali-sensei... how would he know about the coats?"

"Because His Liege is the Elder of the People of the Night."

"Oh?"

"Eh? Ehhh?"

As a Strass agent, Makimoto had clashed with the People of the Night several times. Precisely because of that, hearing this threw her into complete confusion.

Mercuriali-sensei, whom she saw every day, was actually non-human?

"In any case, I believe it would be best for you to move quickly."

"You are absolutely correct. Let us go, Makimoto-san."

"Makimoto..."

"Eh?"

"You can just call me Makimoto."

"Understood. Let us hurry, Makimoto."

Katsuki spoke slightly faster than usual, and the tips of his ears

were turning red. Makimoto guessed that must be his reaction when he was embarrassed.

"Thank you very much."

"You are most welcome."

As she took the coat from Tanaka, Makimoto thought about how painful it would be if Strass ever ordered her to fight this man. But then she remembered—she no longer had to fight anyone ever again.

Makimoto nodded in thanks to Tanaka, and the two hurried out of the school.

Tanaka watched the two young people running off hand in hand, their figures growing smaller, and murmured to himself:

"Youth truly is wonderful."

Tanaka Yoshiharu believed that from the bottom of his heart.

Ever since becoming a vampire (he still was not used to the term People of the Night), his body had stopped aging. If he wished, he could drink human blood to rejuvenate himself and regain youth. But Tanaka chose not to. The act of killing others, of treating their blood as food, filled him with an indescribable revulsion.

His loyalty to Lord Mercuriali would never waver, and he had never hesitated in his resolve to live and die alongside him. But he knew he would eventually grow old, and the moment to let go of everything would come eventually. Tanaka gently closed his eyes and began to imagine the hardships and perils those two young people would have to face from now on.

Chapter Five

- 1 -

"Alright, what should we do next?"

Chaos ruled the entire city. It felt as if some great catastrophe had struck—tens of thousands of people were trying to flee, traffic was hopelessly jammed, and everyone ran through the streets with bags and bundles in their arms. And the reason the crowds never thinned was actually very simple.

Because of the inspections, soldiers from Strass were stationed at every entrance and exit of the town. Long lines of people waited to be checked, while others panicked and wandered about searching for alternate routes. Gunshots occasionally rang out from somewhere—was it meant to intimidate the public? Or was there another reason...

"Should we go hide at Mineyuki-kun's place? Or..."

At that moment, Makimoto picked up a flyer that must have been scattered from above. Printed on it were large photos of Katsuki and Makimoto.

Next to the photos, bold red letters declared—"Perpetrators of the Serial Murders."

"As long as we wear these coats, we will not be in danger. Whether we return to the boarding house or seek refuge at Goutou Temple, it will not be a problem."

People kept rushing past them. The coats gifted by Manager-san seemed to completely erase their "presence." Even when they deliberately stood in front of others, their images never reached anyone's mind. Everyone unconsciously avoided them.

"Yeah... but..."

Makimoto gathered her courage and spoke:

"All of this... we caused it, did we not?"

"While these events were caused by us, the responsibility does not lie with us."

Katsuki replied in a calm tone.

"How can you say that..."

"Now that matters have escalated to this point, the cause is no longer important. The issue lies in the actions we must take from here on."

Makimoto felt a sharp pain in her chest and could not continue speaking.

"I want to save your life, Makimoto."

"Eh?"

"I want to save you."

"That is impossible!"

"As long as we wear these coats, Strass cannot detect our existence. In this manner, we can conduct a surprise attack."

"Even if we fight... even if people are killed, what would we gain in the end?"

"We can negotiate and demand that Strass allow you to continue living."

"That is impossible..."

"How can we know the outcome without attempting it? Strass also appears to have the objective of obtaining this power of mine that can activate non-humans. If I use this as a bargaining chip..."

The moment she heard those words, Makimoto Misae collapsed in despair.

Kumon Katsuki was someone who did not understand how to read the mood. He would voice his inner thoughts without any concealment and firmly believed that doing so was a virtue.

But in that instant—

He felt ashamed of his own words and deeply regretted them.

To him, he had merely proposed one possible method to save Makimoto.

But Makimoto could not bear the thought of losing Katsuki.

If the driving force supporting Makimoto was hope, then Katsuki's words were equivalent to despair.

Because Kumon Katsuki did not know how to lie. If he did, he would have known what to say.

"Makimoto! Makimoto!"

Katsuki held the collapsing Makimoto in his arms. From the sensation in his hands, he realized her body was continuously softening.

"Ka... tsu... ki..."

Makimoto's voice came out in broken fragments. Katsuki quickly pressed his ear close.

"You... must not... die..."

"I promise you, I will not die."

He told a lie—a transparent, clumsy lie, because all humans, in the end, die.

"You... are... lying..."

"Stop it!"

Katsuki pressed a long, trembling kiss to the crimson lips on Makimoto's dissolving face, his tears mixing with the fluids he tried to pass to her, yet nothing changed—she kept melting in his arms.

Suddenly, he remembered what Ignis had once said.

—Experimental subjects are, in the end, still human. If you grant them too much non-human power, the balance will simply collapse.

Kumon Katsuki silently bit his lip, letting the blood flow from the wound, and passed it to Makimoto through their kiss.

After one long, bitter kiss, Makimoto slowly opened her eyes,

looking up at Katsuki as his tears spilled over her.

"Makimoto!"

Makimoto felt herself melting away—her body losing shape, her consciousness slowly fading.

Then she suddenly realized—

She was looking down from above. She saw a shapeless mass of flesh wrapped in clothing, and Katsuki holding it in his arms, crying.

"Oh my, we meet again."

Makimoto turned around, drawn by a familiar voice. A black umbrella appeared before her.

A girl holding a black parasol spun it lightly in her hand.

"You are..."

She had met this person before, yet could not recall her name.

"Are you... here to take me?"

The girl shook her head.

"I am merely passing by."

She raised her hand and pointed toward a distant street.

A child lay motionless on the ground. Having fallen in the chaotic crowd, he was trampled and crushed by the masses, eventually being kicked to the side of the road to die without anyone noticing.

A shadow clung closely to the girl's side. It was the ethereal shadow of a child, like a mirage—and upon closer inspection, it was not just one. Numerous shadows followed behind her.

"Would you like to come with us?"

The girl extended her gloved hand toward Makimoto. Makimoto understood that if she took that hand, she would be freed.

"I... I..."

Amidst the void, the sound of Katsuki calling her name reached her from afar. That was enough. There was no other choice; even if it left Katsuki heartbroken, it was better than letting him fall into the hands of Strass.

But...

There was more than one voice.

Countless cries of sorrow filled the city—children's voices, the weak, pleas for help.

Who caused all this? Herself. Because she kept running away... No. That was not it.

—Now that matters have escalated to this point, the cause is no longer important. The issue lies in the actions we must take from here on.

Katsuki had said that just moments ago.

"I... I..."

I want to be an ordinary girl.

—The word "ordinary" literally means that which is "universally prevalent".

I want to be like Fuyu-nee.

—Being on the side of justice is sometimes very painful.

I want to become a Warrior of Justice.

—Justice is merely an ideal. Becoming a Warrior of Justice is just an action.

"I must go."

The girl with the black parasol spoke gently. The moment of decision had come.

Makimoto shook her head.

"Not yet... but I will follow you soon."

"Very well."

The girl smiled.

"Then we shall meet again."

"Makimoto!"

Whether it was an illusion or not, Katsuki felt the sensation in his

hands becoming more distinct. Then, like a film playing in reverse, Makimoto's distorted silhouette gradually returned to its original form.

"Ka... tsu... ki."

Makimoto let him hold her tightly, offering a weak smile as she slowly stood.

"Are you alright?"

"I just need a moment."

Makimoto walked to the side of the road and looked at the corpse of the child abandoned on the ground. Then she closed her eyes and held the body tightly in contemplation.

Katsuki stood by her side, unsure what to say. Makimoto gently placed the child back on the ground, then turned to him.

"Could you listen to one selfish request of mine?"

Several lines of reasoning flashed through Katsuki's mind.

One: I must first judge based on the content of your request.

Two: Humans are creatures who act according to their own "selfishness."

Three: Generally speaking, selfishness mostly refers to actions that bring loss to others, and the "other" in this case is me; therefore, I do not believe it is necessary for me to blindly accept a request that is harmful and without benefit to myself.

But at this moment, Kumon Katsuki suddenly had an epiphany.

He abandoned the excess theories and simply nodded.

"I want to become a Warrior of Justice."

Makimoto's resolute tone shocked Katsuki.

—For me, personal happiness is my highest priority. And my happiness is to stay by your side for a long time. For that purpose, I will not abandon any hope.

Those were the words he had spoken just last night.

If Makimoto's happiness was to become a Warrior of Justice, then her so-called happiness would have a very high probability of conflicting with his own.

Kumon Katsuki absolutely did not want to lie to Makimoto.

"I will help you."

Nevertheless, he swallowed his sorrow and agreed.

"Thank you."

Makimoto's smile filled Katsuki's heart with warmth.

- 2 -

Once the course of action was decided, Katsuki's thinking speed increased considerably.

"First, we must find a way to calm this commotion."

"How do we do that?"

"The crowds are stuck because of Strass' inspections. In other words, once they confirm our location, they should theoretically stop the inspections."

"I see."

Makimoto immediately took off her coat, folded it, and put it into her bag. Katsuki, standing beside her, followed suit.

The two stood plainly amidst the noisy crowd.

"What should we do, Katsuki? No one is noticing us."

"It is to be expected; the public only has our faces to go by."

"If it is just the faces, then the clothes... ah!"

"That uniform is your own creation, is it not? In that case... make it impossible for them to look away."

Makimoto concentrated. Her power was not limited to merely softening her body—she imagined herself not in the uniform, but in the form she was most familiar with.

A series of curdling sounds echoed as her skin began to harden, and the stabilizing needles pierced into her body. This was followed by the familiar sensation of pain she had long since grown used to. Her uniform burst apart, replaced by a red bodysuit. Finally, she dissolved the white mask on her face—she could not hide her face now.

At that same moment, the surrounding crowd screamed.

Some people fled immediately—some alone, some holding hands, some stumbling and falling.

Then the rest of the crowd surrounded them from afar, holding their breath as they stared. Some snapped photos with their phones, others shouted frantically into their receivers—whether to the police or to friends, no one knew.

There were others hiding in their homes, peeking at the situation outside through their windows.

Then someone finally threw the first stone.

"Monsters!"

"Murderers!"

Lipsticks, wallets, phones, bags, beer bottles.

Someone even kicked a convenience store trash bin toward them, sending leftover food and empty drink bottles flying.

Makimoto did not dodge. She stood silently, enduring everything. Her face and body were smeared with filth.

A vase thrown from a high-rise apartment building window may have missed its mark, but the shards that shattered upon hitting the ground bounded toward Katsuki.

"Katsuki!"

"Do not worry. I possess your abilities as well."

Katsuki swayed his body slightly, and the shards were immediately deflected. Although he could not transform as drastically as Makimoto, a slight softening was not difficult for him.

"Do not mind me. Are you alright, Makimoto?"

"Yes. Taking this form actually made my body feel more stable."

The bodysuit that held her together, the needles piercing through her body—Makimoto finally realized they were all designed to help her maintain a human shape.

"It is time."

As soon as he said it, Katsuki raised his right hand and struck the ground, shattering the asphalt.

The crowd panicked. Windows of nearby buildings slammed shut one by one.

"With this, they should discover our location, and the inspections will stop."

"Mm... mm."

"Move!"

Katsuki gathered strength in his diaphragm and shouted:

"Clear this place at once! Anyone who remains, I shall kill without hesitation!"

He extended his right hand, gripping a chunk of asphalt, and crushed it. The compressed fragment turned into fine dust and scattered.

"Did you hear me!?"

The terrified crowd scattered instantly, fleeing as fast as they could. Soon, no one remained in sight.

"Monsters!"

The insults lingered in the air, only growing louder.

"Monsters!"

Some came from afar, some from nearby. Each one struck

Makimoto like a blow.

"Monsters!"

She knew, she understood perfectly. Ever since that day, she had known she was no longer human. But...

"Katsuki."

"What is it?"

"Being on the side of justice is indeed very painful."

"I agree."

Katsuki smiled. His smile gave Makimoto a sliver of comfort.

Katsuki took off the scarf wrapped around his neck and wiped away the filth on Makimoto's face.

"Ah..."

A touch gentler than any caress nearly took Makimoto's breath away.

"Makimoto Misae is a Warrior of Justice."

Katsuki's voice echoed in her ears.

"Then you must look the part."

He gently wrapped his purple scarf around her neck.

"This is the Scarf of Justice."

Katsuki seemed to be joking, yet his tone was completely serious.

To Makimoto, it was more beautiful than any sweet words, and it moved her deeply.

"Let us go."

Makimoto touched her neck, tracing the fabric. She wanted to cherish and protect this—the very first gift she had ever received from the earnest Katsuki.

"Mm."

She enveloped the scarf with her skin, gradually dyeing it the same color as her bodysuit. The scarf, vivid as a blazing fire, fluttered in the wind.

Then Makimoto and Katsuki both charged forward together.

- 3 -

On an empty street lay a corpse by the roadside.

A young woman had been shoved, knocked down, trampled, and kicked aside by the frenzied crowd, ultimately abandoned where she fell.

Her expression was full of sorrow—not because of her injuries, but because of the small life she held in her arms, the only thing she cared about.

Even with broken ribs and injured internal organs, she desperately shielded her daughter with her body.

The baby's faint cries reached no one. The cold wind stole her warmth and her life.

At that moment—

A pair of gentle hands reached toward the small baby.

"There, there... no more tears. You must have been very scared."

A woman in an apron picked up the bloodstained baby. She was not alone—three more infants were strapped to her back, and many children clung to her skirt.

One of the children saw the corpse and burst into tears.

"Mamaaa!"

The woman in an apron quickly warmed the baby with her body heat, then let her drink from a bottle. After that, she comforted each child in turn.

"Kenta, do not cry. Kana, it is alright. Minoru-kun, we are almost there."

She stroked one child's cheek and smoothed his hair. The jagged edges of their sobs smoothed into soft whimpers under her touch. With

the steady, practiced grace of a lifetime of care, she tended to the small lives strapped to her back.

"Tooru-kun, hang in there just a bit more. Hisako, it'll only be a little longer until we can go home."

They were all children abandoned in this city.

Some had gotten lost and could not find their parents. Some had locked themselves in rooms, trembling. And one person had heard all their cries.

"I've got to hand it to you, being able to remember every one of their names."

The owner of the voice sounded somewhat irritated.

"Oh, it is simple enough. Each little one has a name of their own."

"Infants all look the same. They are just beasts who only know how to cry."

The woman in the red coat appeared quite displeased, yet she still held the baby securely. Several children quietly clung to her coat hem.

"Now then, Ignis. If you still have the energy to complain..."

"Honestly, why must I be here helping you with these squealing creatures?"

"You are an adult, so stop complaining."

Ignis clicked her tongue and pulled apart the children who had started quarreling.

"Are you just going to leave Katsuki and the others alone?"

"They are strong, good children. They will be fine."

"For someone so ancient, you remain remarkably irresponsible."

"I am nowhere near as extreme as you."

As the two continued forward, more and more children gathered behind them. It seemed it would still take some time before they reached the boarding house on the hillside.

Chapter Six

- 1 -

Makimoto and Kumon Katsuki passed through the checkpoint without a scratch.

Koudaka sat in front of the surveillance monitors, his face etched with a mounting, cold distress.

The situation could not have been more dire.

N9 Fantastica was supposed to be the trump card for capturing Kumon Katsuki, yet she had now become an enemy instead—utterly defeating the purpose. The ability Kumon Katsuki possessed was, to Strass, an indispensable force for exterminating non-humans. If he were killed, the entire plan would lose its meaning.

N9 Fantastica's softening ability originally belonged to a parasitic organism. By fusing with a severely injured human, she could keep that person alive. As long as Kumon Katsuki's head remained intact, no matter how grievously his body was damaged, he would survive. That was why Strass regarded N9 as their trump card and ordered her to infiltrate Kaitou Academy.

Founded by Koudaka Shirou, Strass Pharmaceuticals rapidly expanded by capturing non-humans, dissecting them, and extracting medicinal components from their bodies. To Strass, which profited enormously from this, non-humans were not enemies—they were precious resources.

What Strass needed were the non-humans themselves, not their deaths. Their anti–nonhuman weaponry existed only as a byproduct to achieve that goal.

Whether as an arms dealer or a pharmaceutical company, if they hunted non-humans to extinction, they would lose everything.

Those behind the scenes understood this all too well.

But in truth, that was a misconception.

Koudaka Shirou despised non-humans from the depths of his heart —especially the fact that they devoured humans. He pursued only one goal: to eradicate all non-humans with the smallest possible sacrifice. The means to achieve that goal were the enhancement of the experimental subjects and the power of Kumon Katsuki.

The plan had veered far off course, and unnecessary sacrifices had already occurred.

But at this point, he could no longer turn back.

"N9 is heading toward Strass headquarters."

"Which units are currently operational?"

Koudaka asked the subordinate waiting beside him.

"If operated manually, N2 through N8 can all be deployed."

"And those capable of moving autonomously?"

"N7 Speed Star and N8 Human Flare."

"Dispatch N7 Speed Star to Goutou Temple in Saimatsu City to capture Kumon Megumi."

"Yes, sir."

"The remaining units are to intercept N9 and Kumon Katsuki. Remember, they must be captured alive."

"But..."

"All we need to do is stall for time. Once N9 self-destructs, the problem resolves itself."

"Understood."

After issuing his orders, Koudaka continued staring at the faces of the boy and girl on the surveillance screens.

- 2 -

Deep beneath the chapel, the only illumination in the entire space came from the pale yellow flame of a single candelabrum.

Mercuriali, his entire body scorched by sunlight, lay submerged in a bath filled with fresh, crimson blood.

"Pardon the intrusion."

A man with thinning hair stepped out from the side, carrying a tray with black tea. Though his suit was somewhat worn, the way he held the tray with one hand radiated the dignified presence of a seasoned butler.

"Might I ask if you are feeling any better, Mercuriali-sama?"

"My condition is fair, though I remain a prisoner of this vessel for a while longer."

Mercuriali lifted the teacup and took a small sip.

"I suppose I was a bit too impulsive after all."

"You are far too hard on yourself."

Tanaka replied with a solemn expression.

"Koudaka is straightforward, yet not foolish. It was necessary to go to such lengths."

Mercuriali smiled.

"This way, the People of the Night cannot take action against Strass today, and Strass will not view us—who have lost our combat strength—as enemies."

"Everything is within your calculations."

"Strass has lost its trump card and now wagers everything on a desperate gamble. Yet regardless of the outcome, the survival of the People of the Night remains unshakable."

Once Mercuriali finished his tea, Tanaka respectfully took the cup from his hands.

"Let matters of the young be entrusted to the young."

"As you say."

Mercuriali rose from the bath, crimson blood dripping from his body.

"I shall take a brief slumber. I leave the rest to you."

"As you command."

Tanaka attended to his master, wiping his body and assisting him into the coffin.

"May you have pleasant dreams."

With the soft thud of the coffin lid, Tanaka snuffed the candle, surrendering the chamber to the darkness.

- 3 -

For these two, passing through the checkpoint was effortless. Bullets and batons could not harm them, and no matter how narrow the gaps were, they could slip through with ease.

They only needed to be careful not to let stray bullets hit anyone else, but even that was not much trouble for them.

"Hmm... the true challenge begins now."

"Mm."

The two sprinted through the mountains at full speed, their steps pounding the ground with enough force to shatter it. Whenever branches blocked their path, they tucked their bodies in and slipped past them one by one.

"Let us discuss our strategy. What enemies remain within Strass?"

"Experimental subjects like me."

"I see. What kind of abilities do they possess?"

"Let me think..."

Makimoto searched her memory carefully.

"Someone with a very hard body..."

"That will be easy."

"Someone who releases lightning."

"I see. What else?"

"Someone who sprays water... someone who breathes fire... and someone who emits shockwaves."

"Including you, that makes six."

"Since I am N9, there are three remaining. But two of them are already..."

Makimoto had witnessed the death of N1 Invisible Blade with her own eyes, and N3 Disorder had already been discarded.

"There is also someone who moves very fast."

"That one will be troublesome."

Katsuki frowned slightly.

"Are their reflexes superior to our own as well?"

"Mm... mm."

"I see... in that case, we must formulate a plan beforehand."

Katsuki continued thinking without slowing his pace.

"Katsuki, you are amazing..."

"What?"

"You are so reliable."

"To be someone others can rely upon is a virtue."

Katsuki agreed as he ran.

"I shall first confirm our objective for this excursion. We are to become Warriors of Justice, is that correct?"

"Mm."

"And what is our specific methodology?"

"If Strass continues to exist... more people like me will continue to be created."

"So we are to crush Strass, then?"

"B-but not everyone inside Strass is bad, you know. On the surface, it is just an ordinary company, and there are some kind older employees too..."

"Then we shall selectively crush the upper management of Strass."

"Ah... yes, let us do that."

Makimoto's feelings were tangled. The effects of brainwashing and the drugs still lingered faintly in her body, but more than that, imagining the deaths of the people she had known for so long pained her deeply.

"If possible, I do not want to kill anyone. But... I do not want more victims either."

"Then we shall revise our objective: we selectively crush the upper management of Strass, yet incapacitate them within a range that does not endanger their lives. And what of the experimental subjects?"

"Eh?"

"Assuming we defeat Strass, the experimental subjects will likewise be unable to continue receiving their ‘adjustments.’"

"Ah..."

"Functionally, the result would be no different from killing them."

Makimoto wondered what Fuyu-nee would choose.

"Even so... I still do not want to take lives."

"Understood. Then we shall thoroughly crush the Strass corporation, showing as much mercy as possible, and incapacitate the experimental subjects."

"I am sorry... I am asking for so much."

"Justice is, by nature, a path fraught with hardship."

"I-is it really?"

"Humans are born into this world to pursue happiness."

"But not everyone can attain happiness."

Hearing Katsuki's words, Makimoto could not help but speak from the heart. Strass, Mercuriali-sensei, and even the fishmen she had

killed—surely all of them had longed for happiness.

"Indeed. What obstructs happiness is the towering wall called difficulty. If the path of life were smooth, this world would have become a paradise long ago."

"Uh..."

Makimoto fell into thought, unsure whether Katsuki's words were optimistic or pessimistic.

Imagining a world where Katsuki, Megumi, Mineyuki, their classmates at school, Mercuriali-sensei, Ugaya, Human Flare, and all the other experimental subjects—where anyone—could obtain happiness.

It was far too difficult.

"Precisely because it is difficult, it is worth striving for."

"I suppose that is what makes it so exhausting."

Though she said that, Makimoto smiled. She touched the scarf fluttering in the wind—there was a slight sense of security there.

Relaxing her mind, Makimoto suddenly felt her knees give out. She slammed into the ground and bounced back up.

"Oh no!"

Katsuki quickly turned and caught her in his arms.

"I am sorry, I tripped."

"No, it is my fault. You should not waste too much strength."

As soon as he said that, Katsuki lifted Makimoto into his arms.

"W-wait."

Hearing Makimoto's protest, Katsuki immediately halted. Only the scarf around Makimoto's neck continued fluttering in the wind.

"..."

"I am waiting."

"Ah, um..."

Held in Katsuki's arms, Makimoto's face turned bright red.

"Mm?"

Unable to find the right words, Makimoto wrapped her arms around Katsuki's neck and kissed him.

A brief, intimate touch—their breath a single, shared warmth in the cold mountain air.

Then they both pulled back at the same time.

"That is enough."

Seeing Katsuki's face as red as her own, Makimoto felt deeply satisfied.

"Is that sufficient?"

"Mm."

"Then let us go. To achieve our justice."

With that, Katsuki began running again.

Cradled in his arms, Makimoto swayed with each step, thinking that being a Warrior of Justice might not be so painful after all.

- 4 -

Today, Goutou Temple was in utter chaos. Not only had they opened the largest main hall, even the courtyard was filled with rows of tents.

To put it bluntly, the entire temple looked like a refugee camp.

"Anyone seen Grandma Taniguchi? What about old man Ishikawa?"

Mineyuki was wrestling with three or four phones at once, shouting as he flipped through the registry of temple families⊕.

⊕In Japan, temples form lifetime contracts with households, and families bound to a temple through such contracts are called danka.

The city's police force had completely collapsed, and most medical

institutions were under the control of Strass, making them impossible to trust.

Mineyuki's father and the monks were running everywhere—maintaining order, guiding citizens to safety, and taking in the injured.

Wounded people and elderly with mobility issues were brought to the temple one after another.

"Mineyuki, the food's ready ~ ~ "

"Thanks, Megumi-chan."

Megumi was helping in the kitchen, preparing meals.

She had cooked the beef stew she learned to make while on dormitory duty during her study abroad in England—basically just tossing a pile of vegetables and meat into a big pot to simmer. She never expected it would come in handy today.

"This is the food Megumi-chan worked her butt off to make, so eat it properly!"

The moment Mineyuki shouted with his usual booming voice, the evacuees immediately gathered around him. Megumi, blushing, stood beside him and ladled stew into each person's bowl.

"How pleasant. The wind blowing here is so gentle."

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono stood atop a large tree within Goutou Temple, smiling.

The city was filled with the scents of steel, blood, fear, and fury—yet this small sanctuary was filled with laughter.

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono was a hunter who never let her chosen prey escape, but she did not enjoy killing. Taking a life without eating it was, to her, the lowest act. That was why she loved hearing these sounds of laughter.

She touched the collar around her neck.

She could not allow Kumon Megumi to fall into the hands of Strass. That was the oath she had made with Mercuriali.

"The People of the Plains keep their oaths."

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the girl leapt from the treetop, riding the wind. She slipped through the air unseen and landed outside the temple wall.

A giant stood there.

A giant clad in reinforced armor, wearing a white mask.

"Hello there."

Unfazed, the girl greeted the giant with calm composure.

"I am Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono. How should I address you?"

"I am... Speed Star... faster... than anyone..."

"Is that so? Then let us have a race."

"My mission is... to capture... Kumon Megumi."

"Then I must stop you."

A gale of whetted edges swirled around the girl, but the moment it touched the experimental subject, it vanished without a trace.

"Pointless... your power has no effect on me."

The greatest ability of Strass' experimental subjects was the nullification of non-human magic.

"Whether it has an effect or not is irrelevant. One cannot know the outcome without trying. Furthermore, I must keep my own oath."

"I... must complete... my mission."

With a thunderous roar, N7 Speed Star lunged forward at near-sonic speed, closing the distance in an instant and unleashing twenty-three punches in rapid succession.

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono was blasted backward, the impact slamming her into the wall. Blood streamed down her body.

She coughed up several mouthfuls of blood, then leapt down from the wall and took her stance once more.

"Then let us see which weighs heavier upon the wind: my oath, or your mission."

"Eliminating... obstruction..."

N7 Speed Star mirrored her stance.

The girl smiled—a bright, wind-swept smile. It was the kind of flawless smile worn not by someone resolved to die, but by someone who could accept death at any moment without regret.

"Today is a fine day to die."

And with those words, the battle began.

- 5 -

"...Their numbers are certainly quite large."

Katsuki's voice remained perfectly composed.

"Mm."

Makimoto, standing back-to-back with Katsuki, nodded.

They stood on land belonging to Strass Pharmaceuticals, surrounded by swarms of aberrations—human-beast hybrids, half-human fish, wings that could not fly, mechanical arms, distorted black silhouettes, and countless masked giants.

The ring of bodies around them drew in, slow and relentless.

"Are any of the experimental subjects you mentioned earlier among them?"

"No."

Makimoto could immediately sense the presence of experimental subjects.

Everyone here was a failed experiment. These countless mutants, created by Ugaya's own hands, had unstable abilities and had not died despite being production failures.

"Perfect. I wanted to practice some combat techniques."

Katsuki planted his left foot firmly on the ground and delivered a brutal side kick, striking the chin of a boy whose head was half-tiger.

The boy collapsed from the concussion.

And that marked the beginning of the battle.

The hordes of aberrations roared.

Makimoto understood those cries—they were wails from the depths of their hearts. Forced to live, forbidden to die, their bodies cut apart day after day. Seeing them brought back memories of her own past.

"I am sorry."

With those words, Makimoto transformed her right arm into a blade to block a bear claw, while her left hand wrapped around an enemy's head and gently slammed it into the ground.

"Do not overexert yourself."

Beside her, Katsuki wielded his softening ability with precision.

As long as he kept his footing, any posture was effortless. By extending or bending his limbs, he could strike from any angle.

Katsuki slipped into blind spots with unexpected movements, targeting vital points again and again.

Using a stance that looked like he was about to fall, he knocked three enemies to the ground in an instant and tossed them aside so they would not be trampled by the oncoming swarm.

"Makimoto, conserve your strength. The enemy's goal is to stall us."

Katsuki reminded her calmly.

"Mm... mm..."

Makimoto felt the bodysuit with every inch of her skin, drawing the outline of a human body in her mind. To keep from losing herself, she fought using techniques a human could perform, focusing on guarding Katsuki's back.

A mound of unconscious aberrations rose at their backs like a small, grotesque hill. The two fought back-to-back, and gradually, the battle ceased to resemble a battle at all—it became one-sided

destruction.

Their fists were coated in blood and vomit of the aberrations, yet Makimoto and Katsuki did not waver, holding fast to their resolve not to kill.

Then, suddenly, the battle ended.

As they felled the last aberration, a beam of heat shot from afar, singeing a small patch of Katsuki's hair.

"Hey, Fantastica, you're finally back."

Before them stood a smiling American man—and three experimental subjects.

"Which one is which?"

"Uh... counting from the right: lightning, water, shockwave. And the one flying in the air is the one who sprays fire."

"Understood."

Katsuki grabbed Makimoto's hand and leapt aside, making sure the countless aberrations behind them would not be caught in the crossfire.

"I am Kumon Katsuki. As a Warrior of Justice, I shall destroy Strass!"

"Justice? You?"

The boy raised his voice so that everyone could hear what he said.

"No, I am not justice myself. I am merely on the side of justice."

"I... I am too!"

"Fantastica? Shouldn't we be the Warriors of Justice?"

"I am not Fantastica."

Makimoto declared calmly:

"My name is Makimoto Misae. I am the younger sister of Makimoto Fuyuko, and the one who inherited her courage!"

The cheerful American man listened, then answered with a sorrowful shrug:

"But I am Human Flare."

Chapter Seven

- 1 -

Human Flare had no name. He had one at birth, but after countless rounds of brainwashing and conditioning, even his own name gradually faded from memory.

"Maintain your distance. Exhaust Fantastica's stamina."

A man's voice came through the loudspeaker. If he remembered correctly, that should be the president named Koudaka. Looked like he did not have to listen to that hysterical woman this time.

Kumon Katsuki and Makimoto began to move.

Among the four experimental subjects, the only one who still retained self-awareness was Human Flare. The other three could only act through remote operation by the researchers.

The mission, however, appeared to be going quite smoothly.

The fact that Kumon Katsuki had absorbed Fantastica's ability was good news for Strass, as it meant he would not die easily.

The four successfully surrounded Fantastica and Katsuki.

"Here we go!"

He unleashed scorching flames exceeding four thousand degrees.

Twenty million volts of lightning exploded through the air.

A shockwave of seven million joules erupted.

An ultra-high-pressure water jet fired at twenty million millibars.

The combined force, enough to rival a small nuclear blast, seemed at first glance to swallow Fantastica whole.

"Makimoto's power..."

Before the two launched their assault, Katsuki had told Makimoto:

"Simply put, it is elemental conversion."

"I can... convert elements?"

"Correct. And the softening of your body is merely one manifestation of it."

"Then can I also make my body hard?"

"Even if you harden it, it may not be necessarily useful. Softening is more advantageous for us."

At the instant before the explosion.

"Plan A!"

Following Katsuki's command, Makimoto began to transform.

In an instant, Makimoto stretched her body thin and flat, becoming like a sheet of paper.

Katsuki likewise lowered the density of his body and kicked off the ground with force. The two leapt into the sky together. The impact of the explosion rushed toward them, but Katsuki and Makimoto skillfully used that force, drifting upward like leaves dancing in the air.

"All shots missed! But this time it won't miss again!"

Being in midair meant there was nowhere to hide. The four experimental subjects locked onto Katsuki and Makimoto once more.

"Plan B!"

"Yes!"

Makimoto once again recalled what Katsuki had told her.

It was the chemical formula she had struggled so hard to memorize.

One proton plus one neutron becomes deuterium.

One proton plus two neutrons becomes tritium.

She performed elemental conversion with her fingertips, focusing entirely on imagining the compression in her mind.

——A blinding white light swallowed everything before their eyes ——

- 2 -

"Mm. It appears we have succeeded."

Katsuki said softly as he drifted down from the sky.

"Wha... what just happened?"

"It was merely a rudimentary nuclear fusion reaction."

"Eh? Eh?"

"When deuterium and tritium fuse, they form a helium nucleus and release a high-energy neutron. That reaction produces a substantial amount of energy."

Katsuki explained to Makimoto in an understated tone.

"Due to the absence of free neutrons to sustain further reactions, the blast radius remained limited, however..."

The three experimental subjects lay collapsed on the ground.

"The reaction generated a significant electromagnetic pulse. As a result, the electronic infrastructure of Strass should be neutralized. It appears the experimental subjects were being remotely controlled through some devices, which have now been rendered inoperable."

"Um..."

"Your power is truly remarkable."

"What if... I had failed?"

"We would have figured something out then."

Makimoto suddenly felt her whole body weaken.

"In any case, we have achieved our objective."

Katsuki looked toward Human Flare. He was covering his ears, clearly in pain, but he had not fallen.

"It appears someone was not being remotely controlled. Makimoto, get up."

"Sorry, Katsuki... I'm so sleepy."

It seemed she had exhausted too much power. She could no longer maintain even the bodysuit that shaped her body; her form simply kept melting.

"You must not collapse now! If you fall now, we cannot defeat them!"

Katsuki slapped Makimoto across the face without hesitation.

The pain itself was trivial, but the fact that Katsuki had struck her finally snapped Makimoto back to awareness. Even so, she could only barely open her eyes.

She saw tears—Katsuki was crying.

No matter the situation, Katsuki was always calm, always reliable...

Yet here he was, crying in sorrow.

The warm droplets falling onto Makimoto gave her a bit of strength.

"Plan C!"

"Mm."

Makimoto thought that even if she were to die here now, she would have no regrets.

Katsuki landed lightly, while Fantastica lay limp in his arms, her body sagging and melting.

Human Flare raised both hands toward them.

The light from earlier... its destructive power had been immense. Human Flare still had not recovered his vision. His communicator

crackled with static before bursting into flames, and the ringing in his ears would not stop.

But...

Human Flare had not lost consciousness. His orders were still carved deep into his mind.

Feeling that faint, familiar despair, he shouted:

"Checkmate!"

He did not know whether the other side heard him.

At that moment, Fantastica—Makimoto Misae—lying in Katsuki's arms, seemed to move ever so slightly.

Makimoto Misae used the last of her strength.

If she could not maintain her human form with her own power, then she would borrow someone else's.

This was Katsuki's Plan C.

"Blood Crystal!"

With Katsuki's shout, Makimoto poured every last bit of strength into him, entrusting everything to him. She wrapped her body around Katsuki, and the two became one.

Skin pressed against skin, nerves intertwined with nerves—this was the tightest embrace in history.

No one knew what would happen. Perhaps Makimoto would devour Katsuki, or perhaps her power would run out first.

But in that moment...

The two coexisted within a single body.

—Let us go, Makimoto.

—Mm.

"What!?"

The person who appeared before Human Flare's eyes...

The crimson-glowing armor across his body was proof of the blood

the two had shed together; the scarf fluttering in the wind was unmistakably the symbol of justice.

Human Flare fired a laser from his hand, but the blazing beam was easily deflected by the armor.

The mirror surface created through molecular manipulation allowed the shining armor to reflect every laser beam back.

"HQ? HQ? Answer me, now."

Of course, no one could answer him—the communicator was already destroyed.

Human Flare unleashed everything he had, firing more heat rays, but they had no effect at all.

Seeing the steel hero walking toward him step by step, Human Flare did not retreat—not because he was unafraid, but because the conditioning in his mind would not allow him to.

"Who are you?"

Human Flare shouted in pain.

"I am Beowulf!"

The figure before him answered.

Retreat was forbidden, so Human Flare raised his fist and swung at the figure—but all he received in return was agony.

The opponent struck back with a fist of steel.

"HAHA!"

Human Flare laughed as he spat blood from his mouth. He could not remember the last time he had laughed so freely.

He remembered the manga he used to read.

No matter what kind of hero they were, no matter how special their abilities or how overwhelming their power, in the end...

It always turned into a simple fistfight.

And now he had become the villain in that manga.

Standing before him as his enemy was the hero he had admired for so long.

And that hero had been born because of him.

Just thinking about that brought him a faint sense of comfort.

"Take this!"

Human Flare swung his final punch.

The steel hero took the punch head-on with his face and immediately struck back.

As Human Flare's consciousness faded, he saw something.

Through the gaps in the hero's armor, the eyes within shimmered with a trace of... tears.

- 4 -

(Katsuki, is this enough?)

(The victory conditions have been met. Strass is on the verge of collapse, and no one has lost their life.)

(Mm... that is true.)

(Do not leave me, Makimoto.)

(I am sorry, but if we stay like this any longer, we will not be able to return to our original forms.)

(That is fine.)

(I will end up devouring you, Katsuki.)

(It does not matter.)

(But I do not want that.)

(I said it does not matter.)

(But if that happens... it cannot be called justice, can it?)

(You will die, but if you kill me, you can continue living. The former is what one would call justice, but I would rather choose the latter.)

(Why?)

(I choose love over justice. I love you.)

(I feel the same, so...)

(No! Do not go! Do not leave...)

(Farewell, Katsuki.)

The two separated from their embrace. Katsuki endured the searing pain of nerves being forcibly torn apart. The silvered remains of Makimoto cascaded over his features and through his desperate palms, as elusive and cold as liquid mercury.

"Makimoto!"

Katsuki could not help but scream in desperation. The armor covering his face had vanished, and the liquefied metal sank slowly into the ground.

No matter how desperately Katsuki tried to scoop up the liquid, it slipped mercilessly through his fingers.

"No... this is not justice!"

—A Warrior of Justice is not justice itself.

Reason whispered coldly into Katsuki's ear.

—Justice is merely an ideal. Becoming a Warrior of Justice is an action, and the result of an action does not necessarily represent justice.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

There had to be a third path. A path where both he and Makimoto could live.

But...

Katsuki's mind was completely blank.

He could only let time pass.

In the end...

Each fragment of her existence was claimed by the earth, sinking into the soil until not even a shadow of her presence remained.

"Aaaaaaaah!"

Katsuki's anguished cry scattered into the wind, and at last, silence returned to the surroundings.

- 5 -

Ugaya was running.

Throughout all of Strass, she alone understood what had truly happened.

The molecular transformation triggered by Fantastica, and the nuclear fusion.

What a marvelous experimental result!

She ignored the panicked researchers and the subordinates frantically reporting to their superiors, and simply sprinted.

She clutched the research data to her chest; the experimental records were etched into her brain.

With these, she would have no trouble finding her next sponsor—and then she could create another Fantastica...

Dreams stretched endlessly through Ugaya's mind.

Filled with joy, she left Strass through the back door, completely unaware of the black parasol that brushed past her.

Even if Ugaya forgot...

They would never forget.

The ones labeled as failures still remembered Ugaya.

When they regained consciousness, they noticed Ugaya fleeing Strass.

Unlike the numbered subjects who had undergone intense brainwashing, these failures were deemed such because their minds

could not be stabilized.

The powerful electromagnetic pulse had destroyed all safety locks. The restraints binding them were gone.

"What... what do you want?"

The woman screamed. Half of the failures were deaf, the other half blind; those who could not hear saw her silhouette, those who could not see heard her voice, and those who had lost both senses detected her scent.

The failures who had awakened from unconsciousness slowly walked—or hurried—toward Ugaya.

"Get out of my way, you failures!"

Ugaya's voice and scent provided them with intense stimulation.

"Stay back! What are you trying to do!"

A giant grabbed Ugaya's shoulder, a beast-like figure seized her leg and licked it hungrily, and a mechanical arm tugged at her ear.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaa!"

These actions did not represent their anger, but rather their hunger.

Every failure present hungered for Ugaya.

There were many who sought her, but there was only one Ugaya.

Her screams were finally drowned beneath the swarm of aberrations. Ugaya—or rather, the individual once known as Ugaya—had been evenly divided among them.

"Everyone."

Suddenly, someone spoke in a sorrowful tone.

The aberrations with functioning vision saw a man in a suit. This man with thinning hair in his forties stood in the sunset, and his body was burning.

His sparse hair had been scorched black, smoke seeped continuously through his suit, yet he stood firm before the horde of aberrations.

"What do you intend to do now?"

They began to groan. Almost none of them had names, nor did they remember their experimental numbers. Naturally, they had nowhere to return to.

"If you do not mind... would you be willing to come to me?"

The man wreathed in flames extended his hand. The vast majority of the aberrations accepted his kindness; only a few refused.

The sun gradually dipped below the horizon.

Merciful darkness enveloped the burning man and the swarm of aberrations, and they vanished without a trace.

- 6 -

As the sun set and the veil of night rose, the blond samurai appeared.

"Oh? You are still alive."

"Mm. It is you, Kanata."

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono replied.

At this moment, she could barely stand, resting her back against the wall. Though her hair and body were smeared with blood and dirt, her tone was light.

The masked giant... N7 Speed Star lay with his head resting on her lap.

The battle had been simple—and brutally savage.

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono had no idea how many times N7 Speed Star had struck her, but every time she fell, she rose again.

For every ten punches she took, she returned one. For every hundred blows, she answered with a kick.

When her fists no longer worked, she used her elbows. When her

elbows shattered, she rammed with her shoulder. Even when both legs were broken and her knees crushed, she refused to fall. When her limbs could no longer move, she bit with her teeth.

At last, N7 Speed Star collapsed.

Reduced to words, the entire process sounded almost simple.

"I am taking this giant with me. Is that acceptable?"

The blond samurai effortlessly lifted the giant.

"He is my prey, but I do not intend to eat him. He is yours to carry, samurai."

The girl answered while leaning against the wall.

"Ah, right. What about our duel?"

"Do you intend to fight me in that battered state?"

"A wounded beast bites the hardest, you know. Besides, Kanata, your burns seem rather severe too."

"Your nose is certainly sharp."

"Not bad, right?"

The two exchanged smiles.

Then the samurai suddenly drew the blade at his waist. A flash of steel grazed Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono's throat—but it did not harm her. Instead, it severed the leather collar around her neck.

"Another time. If we are to fight, I wish to test my skills against you when you are at full strength."

As the samurai sheathed his blade, the collar fell to the ground.

"Then I shall wait for you."

Kaze no Ushiro wo Ayumumono smiled faintly, then slowly closed her eyes. Seeing her peaceful, unburdened sleeping face, Kanata Saemonnojou Yukinori could not help but let out a wry smile.

"'Today is a fine day to die'... is that it?"

Final Chapter

- 1 -

"Onii-san! Onii-san!"

When Kumon Katsuki opened his eyes, it was already deep into the night. He sat up from one of the beds inside Goutou Temple.

"Ah... Megumi..."

"...Why am I in this place?"

"Man, I should be the one askin' you that!"

Mineyuki complained from the side.

"I found you collapsed at my front door, and your wounds were already treated. What the hell happened?"

"I am not entirely sure myself."

"Right. Where's Makimoto?"

"She is dead."

"Say what? You bastard!"

"Keep your voice down!"

Without hesitation, Megumi kicked Mineyuki. It was the one kick he could never dodge, and he retreated, clutching his side.

"Onii-san."

"Mm? What is it?"

"You are crying."

Megumi comforted him gently, and only then did Katsuki realize tears were streaming down his cheeks.

"I... have lost the person I loved."

"Mm."

"She chose justice... over me."

Megumi softly stroked her brother's trembling back.

"But I am still here by your side, am I not? I will stay with you forever."

"But Megumi, you are not Makimoto."

Katsuki thought he would be kicked for saying that, but...

"Mm. You are right, Onii-san."

Megumi gave a pained smile.

"Sorry."

"I liked Makimoto-san very much, too."

—And after I went through the trouble of entrusting Onii-san to you.

Kumon Megumi could not help feeling a little resentful toward Makimoto.

Every tear Katsuki shed made Megumi ache with tenderness, yet none of those tears were for her. She could not help but hate that.

If Makimoto were still alive, they could have had a fair competition. Even if Megumi lost, she could accept it. But Makimoto had stolen her brother's heart only to depart first—too unfair.

Megumi hated herself for harboring such thoughts toward the dead, yet she could not stop them from rising.

As she thought all this, Kumon Megumi gently stroked her brother's head.

- 2 -

At the same time that all machinery in Strass fell silent under the

electromagnetic pulse...

The control system of the water tank was also destroyed. The oxygen supply halted, and the creature inside slowly stopped breathing.

She had ceased "living" long ago, so even her own death passed unnoticed.

"Makimoto-san."

Hearing her name called elicited a flicker of response.

"Makimoto Fuyuko-san."

A woman holding a black parasol stood before her.

"I..."

Makimoto Fuyuko slowly remembered.

"Where is Misae? What happened to Misae?"

The first person she thought of was her little sister—the always-worrying Misae, the adorable Misae, the Misae who was so good at housework—her one and only sister in this world.

"Fuyu-nee... I am sorry."

Her younger sister timidly stepped out from behind the girl.

"Good grief! What are you doing in a place like this?"

Ignoring her own situation, Fuyuko immediately scolded her sister. Such was her personality.

"And you! What were you thinking, bringing Misae here?"

"Misae-san has simply reached the end of the life that was hers to walk."

"You call that mess a life? Give me a break... honestly."

Fuyuko scratched her head vigorously.

"Fuyu-nee, I... I fell in love with someone."

Misae confessed shyly.

"Good job. I am proud of you."

Fuyuko finally smiled.

"So? Did you two get... you know, serious?"

"Um... we did not go quite that far, but we did something even better."

"Come on, spill it. Don't keep your sister hanging."

Fuyuko's smile grew brighter.

"We became Warriors of Justice together."

"I see. That is impressive."

"It is about time to go."

The girl with the parasol reminded them gently.

"I have so many things to tell you."

"I will listen. I will listen to everything."

"At this point, we can only accept reality. After all, we are already dead."

Fuyuko laughed heartily.

"Anyway, start from the beginning and tell me everything."

"Mm... it might take a while, Fuyu-nee."

"We've got all the time in the world. First off—what is that boy's name?"

"His name is Kumon Katsuki."

Makimoto Misae spoke that name with a voice full of love.

The sisters walked side by side along the path that rose toward the sky.

Though they appeared nearly the same age, the distinction between elder and younger was unmistakable in their stride.

The younger sister shared her stories in soft, bashful murmurs, while the elder folded her arms and gave way to a bright, unrestrained laugh.

The black parasol spun gently above their heads.

In time, the sisters and the parasol drifted together into the farthest reaches of the starry sky.

And where their steps will lead—no one knows.

Afterword

How troublesome—looks like I already used up everything I could write in the previous volume's afterword!

So this time, let me just jot down whatever comes to mind. Ordinarily, a novelist should let their work speak for itself; a writer who specializes in adaptations, in particular, is much like a member of the backstage crew. Suddenly stepping out onto the stage like this is honestly a bit of a breach of etiquette, but I hope you will permit me this small indulgence.

This book, "Jingai Makyou: Riders of Darkness", is my thirteenth novel. Looking back at the games I've used as the basis for my adaptations so far, the variety has been surprisingly broad—from RPGs and TRPGs to simulation games, shooters, fighting games, and visual novels.

Personally, I believe the job of an adapter is to play fun games and share that fun with more people. In that sense, I feel this profession is truly my calling. Since the original "Jingai Makyou" is an adult-oriented visual novel, some may feel a certain level of hesitation toward it. But I have to say, there are truly many fascinating works in this genre. If you have not yet experienced the original game, I highly recommend it—and I hope this book can serve as compelling evidence of its quality.

Oh, and for readers under eighteen—please wait a few more years. I'm sure the game will make that wait worthwhile.

Kaihou Norimitsu

Makimoto-san is just straight-up cute, isn't she?
(could be read as "ordinarily"/"normally")
Feel moe for Makimoto-san!
And don't forget to check out the PC game version too.
moera [モエラ]
What a bizarre fighting form...
Lightning-fast, with ridiculous reach.
Perks of being formless, I suppose.
Keep supporting Jingai from here on out!!!
Makimoto-san, tomorrow at 4 PM, meet me in front of ALTA.
Waaa Makimoto-san is so moe~
Keep at it, Jingai!
It's great seeing the series catch on like this!!
I love Jingai. Especially Kazepo.
Fantastica is moe.
Digitarou
Pehara Tosou
Oh!! Katuuki
Ten bowls of ramen in a single week!
Carry on...
Well done, Jingai.
Imu Sanjo
Ogami Kriichi
Jingai Yay!
Jingai is the best!! I'll eat it!
Kuroi Kuki
Y'all gotta agree that characters who aren't even human-shaped are the most moe, right? RIGHT?!
Urobuchi
Well then, I'll go with "Moe for Katuuki-kun."
Tobo Ippuu
I'm so happy we get to see Kumon-kun and Makimoto-san bantering again.
Suzuki Yumi
This page took forever to translate and edit.
5+ hours of pure suffering. Enjoy
TipaFlemy
Please check out the PC version of Jingai Makyou as well.
Masakari
Nitro+

Now, it's probably a bit improper to insert oneself like this into someone else's work, as a translator is supposed to be invisible—but I just couldn't resist. Forgive me this small indulgence as well.

At first, I thought I would just roughly translate the text for myself and a few friends; but the ambition quickly kept growing. First it was "I should make a proper, publishable-esque translation." Then it became "I should probably replace the images with hi-res ones from the artbook." And then, inevitably, it became "Fuck it, I'll translate the cover and the logo as well." Some might say I brought this whole struggle upon myself out of my own volition—and you'd be absolutely right. Well, at least Jingai Makyou already had a somewhat official English title (Chaos Gate), so I was thankfully spared the truly grueling task of localizing that.

In any case, I hope you enjoyed this translation; I poured a lot of effort into it. It's certainly not perfect, but it's the best I could do. Now, if only JAST (or the fans) would translate the visual novel so everyone could experience it—Jingai Makyou remains one of my favorite Nitroplus works, and until we get a proper translation, all I can really

do is just highly recommend it to anyone who can read Japanese/Chinese/Korean. In many ways it feels like a mix between Muramasa and FSN, which kinda makes sense once you look at the timeline and the other projects some of the creators were involved in back then. Unfortunately, the setting feels a bit unexplored imo; considering the whole idea of 10+ routes Kaihou Norimitsu mentioned in the commentary for the first volume, and the short stories from the artbook (like the one with Nimbus), there is clearly a **lot** of stuff that was left out of both the VN and the LN. Sadly, as far as I'm aware, none of it was ever expanded on elsewhere.

Still, with the whole Nitro Origin thing, I'm hoping (i.e. coping) that we'll one day see Jingai Makyou 2. We are getting Muramasa 2 after all... aren't we? It *is* still in development, right?

Anyway, I'm out.

TiraRemy